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Challenging Social Norms: Women as Symbols of Prejudice and Stereotypes in World Literature (A Comparative Study)

Abstract: *Throughout the history of world literature, numerous authors have centered their works on female protagonists, presenting them not only as individuals but also as symbols shaped by societal expectations, prejudice, and stereotypes. From the cunning Sheherazade of „1001 Nights“, to Flaubert's conflicted Emma Bovary, Tolstoy's tragic Anna Karenina, and Zola's ambitious Nana, female characters have long been used to explore complex societal dynamics. Even those who were not central figures – such as Homer's faithful Penelope, Shakespeare's Desdemona and Lady Macbeth – have become emblematic of various cultural ideals and gender norms. At the root of these representations lies the biblical figure of Eve, whose "original sin" casts a shadow over women in literary history, often reflecting patriarchal anxieties and the social marginalization of women.*

In this comparative study, Heinrich Böll's „The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum“ and Ismail Kadare's „A Moonlit Night“ are examined as examples of how women continue to be portrayed as symbols of prejudice and social condemnation. These works highlight the consequences of societal judgment on female characters, portraying women as both victims of patriarchal scrutiny and as complex agents challenging these limitations. Moreover, this study reflects on how literature, across cultures and time periods, has both mirrored and challenged the evolving roles of women within society, with particular attention to the enduring stereotypes and norms that shape these narratives.

Keywords: women; prejudice; stereotypes; societal norms; literary representation.

Introduction

The two protagonists

From the very first reading of these two works, the first comparable element - the female protagonists - comes to the fore. As in the work of Böll, as in that of Kadare, the protagonists are females. In a broader perspective, we could talk about the female characters in these two authors. In Böll's work, she is also a protagonist in his other work called "Group Portrait with Lady" (1971), *Women in a River Landscape*

(1985) and others. Kadare, in his very first prose works, including *Coffee Day*, *The Monster* and *The General*, deals with female characters, and with character of women in a multifarious aspect, even in its extremes, beginning with beautiful and troublesome women to prostitutes, elder women who are surnamed as *elderly women of life* or even as *elderly women "katënxhika"* in "Chronicle in Stone". He further creates female protagonists in his other works such as *the Wedding* (1968), *The Ghost Rider* (1979), *Agamemnon's Daughter* (2000), *In front of a Woman's Mirror* (2001), *A Girl in Exile* (2009) and so on.

When I mentioned Kadare's *The Monster* (a work that is built upon the Myth of Trojan Horse) leaving aside the symbolism and allusions with contemporary times), I was reminded of a series of Greek antiquity works where females and women appear to be protagonists. *Helena*, then her sister-in-law, *Klitemnestra*, *Iphigenia* (her daughter), *Andromache*, *Penelope* and others appear in the gallery of the many old epic characters, even within the nucleus of conflict.

A lot of authors come to us in the history of the world literature (famous authors as well, not to mention those usual ones and any other one), whose works have placed females - women as their main characters. Without pretending to make typologies of such works, I have to mention *Scheherzade* of the *1001 Nights* of Arab fairy tales, *Sappho* of Lesbos's sensitive lyrics, *Emma Bovary* of Gustave Flaubert, *Anna Karenina* of L.N. Tolstoy, Emil Zola's *Nana*, Jasunari Kavabata's *Geishas*, to those that, even when they were not the main characters, were transformed into symbols like Homer's *Penelope of Odyssey*, *Desdemona*, *Lady Macbeth* and *Juliette* of William Shakespeare, and other female characters.

If we continue to follow the genesis of female-woman character based on the biblical motif, she appears to us in the form of Eve, created from Adam's rib, with the guiltless "guilt" of fall from Eden. This deadly "curse" accompanies him everywhere through ages, countries, nations, races, and religions.

After this little "journey", let's turn to our protagonists. In the structure of both of these works, Katharina and Mariana become protagonists not so much with their presence in the textual space and structure as with the presence of non-presence. In the active sense of the acting character, they capture very small spaces in relation to other characters, and even when they become visible they represent only inserts of confessions, self-confessions, while the narrator author from the omniscient position and other times by the narrator that identifies the

group (We), as it were, narrates their deeds and actions. In this sense, though nothing seems mysterious, in the imagination of the reader they become not only ubiquitous and omnipresent, as well as for the characters that surround them, but they also exercise an influence and pressure of concern with all their emotional and mental energy. This is what makes them protagonists in the overall development of society, politics, economics, culture and, if you like, of the psychology of their countries and citizens. They are the Cyclone's Eye that swirls everything around.

Considering their character and their actions only from a moral point of view seems to me very narrow. Morality, as well as other categories, is a form of social consciousness that does not occur spontaneously and suddenly. Consequently, its opposite, immorality does neither. Their roots are firmly enrooted in the background of social life and thence they are irrigated or withered.

Katharina and *Mariana*, being special as literary artistic creations, become representative of a type within society, because they exhibit general characteristics that correspond to their types, always according to the Aristotelian principle: events that could have happened, have already happened or may happen.

The formula sometimes used by writers on the margins of their works that (allegedly) similarities with people, actions or circumstances are occasional, is just an attempt for an "alibi", camouflage or excuse. Boll uses this formula as a motto: "The persons and actions of this story are invented by the mind ..." but, nevertheless, he is original as much as honest because he immediately confirms, even stubbornly: ... but if, in describing some journalistic practices, a similarity to the practices used by BILD-ZEITUNG is noticed, I must point out that this has not been done intentionally and is not even a coincidence, but it is inevitable" (Boll, 2007, pg.7).

The phenomenon of *inevitability* also appears in Kadare, but he has no reason to pronounce it, because the *engineers of the spirit* - as Stalin once called political commissioners - were so vigilant that they were ready to accuse him of the opposite, for *deviation from the reality* (when Kadare treated historical motive and themes), or *distortion of reality* (when he revealed the truthfulness of life, as he himself drew the mask off the ideological cover of dictatorship).

Finally, the fact that Kadare's work was "condemned" by an undisclosed trial and, after partial publication in a literary magazine, was not published until the fall of the dictatorship; the fact that its circulation was suspended and the neglecting seeds of silence (nobody had the

courage to speak about the work) were planted, proves that his work was painfully striking the dictatorship, its mechanism, its realism.

I. Background Context

Historically, women in literature have often been cast into roles defined by patriarchal values. From the obedient Penelope in Homer's *Odyssey* to the tragic Emma Bovary in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, literary portrayals of women have frequently mirrored society's expectations, reinforcing stereotypes that depict women as passive, morally vulnerable, or bound to their familial roles. However, the characters of Katharina Blum and Mariana stand apart as they defy conventional expectations. As modern protagonists, they not only question these norms but suffer the consequences of doing so, highlighting the societal backlash against women who deviate from traditional roles. This backdrop allows Böll and Kadare to critique the systemic prejudices against women and explore the underlying societal fears that drive such stereotypes.

II. Methodology

Since this topic typologically belongs to the comparative literature, the research method will also precisely follow the comparison and the parallels between the work and life of both of them. The analysis will reveal the position of Mariana and Katerina as they become representative of a type within society, whereas the vertical and horizontal structure of their impact and intersection is mainly based on being special as literary artistic creations. The "Nata me hënë" (Moonlit Night) had originally circulated as a story from the very beginning. Then, as a variant in the manuscript, then as a story in the magazine "Nëntori" in early 1985, and also in his occasional interviews and lectures. In examining the similarities, the following shall be distinguished: 1. identification of certain common or similar features of previously recognized characters and phenomena, as well as of new characters and phenomena being explored. So, through this method I analyzed in detail Mariana and Katerina, two characters with similarities and differences.

Throughout my work in this study, therefore, relying heavily on the principles of the method of comparison, the studies of Caller, Ann Jefferson, and David Robey have had strong support in terms of secondary literature, without excluding Jury Lottman Tzvetan Todorov.

III. Results

Physical and moral portrait

The issue of female / women characters mentioned in the previous chapter, now we are entering the analysis of two egos, it becomes inevitable for at least an approximate definition of their role in the works of the authors Boll and Kadare. Although the problem is distant and ancient as the world itself, I find the referential origin of a meaningful reformulation in the researcher Toril Moi (Moi, 1985) who relies on the French feminist Helene Cixous, as well as the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. At the beginning of her essay, the Feminist Literary Criticism, she asserts: "I would first suggest that we distinguish between 'feminism' as a political stance, 'feminine' as a biological matter and 'femininity' as a set of characteristics, culturally defined" (Jefferson & Robey, 2004, p. 294). In the context of our study it seems to me that the characters Katharina and Mariana give and take from the three notions above, but I essentially find them related to the position of femininity as a whole of culturally defined characteristics.

During the reading, but on the issue, the thoughts of Cixous and Derrida that alternately complete it, it becomes clearer that in their works, the authors Boll and Kadare do not manifest gender animosity: neither support nor rejection; neither mercy nor criticism. They are neither sympathizers, nor recruits, nor masculine militants and even, I would say, neither neutral. They naturally build characters, not fictional, but on the basis of reflection of reality where, according to Derrida, "meaning is not produced within the ending of the opposite pairs. Rather it is achieved through the "free play of the one who creates the meaning", and Cixous will argue: "Limiting the masculine and feminine to a special exclusion against each other means to force them to enter in a deadly battle within the opposite pairs." (Jefferson & Robey, 2004, p. 306).

In our study, therefore, I do not find Katharina and Mariana as heroines who with revolutionary initiatives and actions want to vindicate gender freedom and rights; I do not find them as wanting to have the attributes of representatives on the basis of gender conflict, but first and foremost, I see them as social beings who are ready to fight with everyone for the independence of their world, including here the society, system, social structure, regardless of whether they appear as men or women. If we were allowed a metaphorical name for their character, I would call them *heroins(female heroes) stripped off heroism*. They have "lost" the chance of heroism because they did not bother about

collective ideals, but for individual ideals. Even when their action could become an approvable and admirable element for a wider circle, as an emanation of resonance, as a consensual principle, the same environment emerges and strips off their heroism with its mechanisms. Perhaps meditations on this issue would lead us further into a parenthesis that raises the conflict between the individual and the society, where the psychology of the crowd, the lynching and other methods emerge, but that is totally different issue.

Within the character's concept, I see Catherine and Mariana as having been realized according to the principle of modernity. The researcher and writer, Fatmir Alimani, speaking of the modernity of characters in Kawabata, Kafka, Kundera and Kadare, generally comes into a sustainable conclusion, which I believe is applicable for the characters of Böll as well: "...the characters have a different nature, not only compared to many other authors but also to each other. In general, they are not classical characters, yet there is something classical in their modernity. They never bring the detailed biography of an X or Y but only some of the most significant moments of their existence. In contrast to classical characters, that are alike in flesh and blood, on the outside they may look pale and skinny, but actually their efficiency is as useful or even more useful than if they had been described more broadly and to the smallest details." (Alimani, 2005, p. 263). Creating characters in this sense is attributed in the first place to creating a character in accordance with the vertical principle rather than detailed description of their appearance. This detail, lack of grandiose superficiality, lack of formal monumentality becomes an element of influence in their deheroization, but, being just ordinary characters, they do not lose any of their weight or significance as protagonists of two literary works.

Here we will look at the texts of both books to see with what brushstrokes the authors Böll and Kadare portray their characters. They (different from Flaubert, for instance, who portrays Emma in her formation, in her development and beyond, since her minority) take and put their portraits only in a given moment, in the moment of drama. Occasionally, they present reminiscences remote like an edit on a pale photograph.

Katharina:

"...a twenty-seven year old woman leaves her house at about 18.45 and heads to participate in a private party" (Boell, 2007).

“...a smart and almost cold woman...in a decisive moment prepared by herself, not only took out the revolver but fired”. Boell (2007, p. 13)

“...she had been very much pleased with this invitation, mostly because she hadn't had the chance to dance for a long time..., Katharina felt an almost pathologic disgust for those dancing nights organized in religious communities”. Boell (2007, p. 15)

“...an extremely shy girl, almost fanatical in sexual matters...”. Boell (2007, p. 19)

“...she, out of fear and confusion, was trying to cover her face with her bag, with the toilet box...he managed to take a picture of her with a wild face expression and untidy hair...”. Boell (2007, p. 21)

“...dead-face woman”. Boell (2007, p. 27)

“...in a strangely elegant manner, she controlled every formulation, asked to have every sentenced read...” Boell (2007, p. 29)

“...she had always had a regular and clean appearance, and was polite, although a bit cold-hearted”. Boell (2007, p. 30)

“...they had tried to hurt her sick pride when it came to money...” Boell (2007, p. 39)

“...had qualified Catherine's writing as exemplary calligraphy of a good student...” Boell (2007, p. 45)

“Katharina Blum did not pay a church tax... she had abandoned the church since she was eleven”. Boell (2007, p. 47)

“...she spent very little on her living...she went to the cinema and, occasionally, bought chocolates...” Boell (2007, p. 47)

“...she had always been a hard-working, regular girl, a bit shy, or, better say, anxious”. Boell (2007, p. 67)

“...the only practical thing she had in mind of doing for now was sewing a carnival costume...” Boell (2007, p. 87)

“...she has two virtues, which are very rare now: loyalty and pride!” Boell (2007, p. 92)

“...so nice and so rare, not feather-brained and yet capable of making love...serious and, yet, young and beautiful, with a charm whose value she did not know herself either...” Boell (p. 94)

“...it was exactly her personality of a fair and honourable girl...it was exactly her personality that had helped her not frail and arrange her ruined life well and beautifully...” Boell (2007, p. 95)

“Keep your head up, dear Katharina! Not everyone thinks badly of you!” Boell (2007, p. 120).

If we try now to look at these evaluations and characterizations generally, in a few words, the portrait of Katharina would be: a woman sometimes twenty-seven year old girl, honourable, a bit shy, regular, clean, proud, smart, nonreligious, serious and without any evident temper.

These general features speak clearly of a character who has an independent Self, Ego and Credo, or, disassembled as notions, “Part of sub consciousness or unconsciousness...that comprise types of leading

instincts of the psyche, which will include the dynamic forces whereby the resources of concepts, meaningful ideas and messages, the language itself and its characteristics are set in motion,” as much as “Desires driven by sources of instincts of receiving pleasure (including memories of the past) want to erupt, thus conscious through the expressive means” (Domi, 2009, p.18). As such, more than ordinary, but independent in her own world, in an environment perverted by greed, she is targeted to be hit or become “like everyone else”, meaning, to lose the independence that is displayed as pride.

Let us now look at its sister-book “*A Moonlit night*” (Kadare, 2004).

Mariana:

“...beautifully dressed and brushed, as usually...” Kadare (2004, p. 14)

“...she had a faint state of mind...” Kadare (2004, p. 25)

“...cheerful girl...” Kadare (2004, p. 34)

“...the appearance, elegance and everything else was acknowledged as a merit of Mariana”. Kadare (2004, p. 35)

“...she was skilful and regular in her work and in everything...” Kadare (2004, p. 42)

“...Mariana’s new topcoat looked perfectly on her...” Kadare (2004, p. 44)

“Mariana was one of those who seemed guilty of her being ignored until now”. Kadare (2004, p. 52)

“Mariana was still white as snow from the shock, when a police officer and a civilian appeared in the lab, accompanied by the head of administration”. Kadare (2004, p. 60)

“...she expected everything with a dead face, where only one observing eye could still see, between the outlines of suffering, the question ‘why?’.” Kadare (2004, p. 66)

“...beautiful, a bit taller than average, with a shining pin on her light...” Kadare (2004, p. 98)

“...Mariana had meanwhile given the first sign of divinity”. Kadare (2004, p. 101).

Like in the first case concerning Katharina, here too we can do a summarized reading to construct Mariana’s portrait in a mosaic shape: a beautiful, cheerful, elegant, average-height girl, skilful and regular in her job, but who, in situations of distress, can become – like Katharina – confused and sickly pale.

The variants we showed in both cases are the profiling of their authors, Böll and Kadare (from the position of the omniscient narrator) and, even, given with – I would say – data with quite reservations. However, why do we, while reading them, feel omnipresence, a fulfilment,

a presence of theirs and why does it feel like their vivid images accompany us accordingly? They speak of themselves, little or not at all. Mostly, Katharina is “obliged” from the investigators to present her biography in the form of a Statement (Chapter 15, pages 21-26), whereas Mariana, in the form of a monologue, displays her experience after receiving the Doctor’s report, as an “evidence of honour for the investigators” of the collective (Chapter 12, page 96-101).

Their images are fulfilled by the other characters, with an astonishing and heuristic depth to the most candid areas like those of tastes, feelings, etc. but the information we obtain from the other characters should be divided because they belong to two contingents: pro and against them.

Katharina gets divorced from Wilhelm Brettloh: “*It hadn’t been six months yet and I started to feel such an antipathy towards my husband that I could not defeat... the court divorced us for my fault, for abandonment with a bad intent*” (page 23).

Mariana gets divorced from Philip: “*Last year she had had relationships and had separated from Philip, for reasons no one knew of*”. (page 51).

“*Her entire library (Katharina’s library, my note V. D.) consisted of four love novels, three police novels and one biography of Napoleon and one of Christina, Queen of Sweden*” (page 20).

“*...Nafje’s call to ask her about the books that Mariana read (amongst them, to verify Mariana’s allegedly liberal stance, was marked ‘Madam Bovari’)*” (page 73).

Apart from the association here, we cannot avoid the similarity that the three of them read and are influenced by love novels, show identical artistic tastes and requirements.

Let us now see the imperfections that the accusers burden on Katharina’s back:

“*I am convinced that she is capable of doing anything. Her father was a disguised communist, and her mother whom I, out of lament, hired for some time as a cleaner, used to steal from me mass wine, and used to do orgies in sacraments...Katharina Bloom regularly accepted visits from men since she was two years old.*” (p. 37).

“*Now everything is clear to me. Our modest happiness was not enough for her, she wanted to reach high! (Ex-husband, my note, V.D.). Perhaps you could send the NEWSPAPER readers my advice: Erroneous perceptions on socialism must suffer this end by all means!*” (p. 42).

“*...a true perversion the other fact that Katharina Blum did not shed a single tear for her dead mother!*” (p. 123).

“*Apparently, Katharina Blum was instructed from a leftist group to ruin Sch’s carrier.*” (p. 124).

“...in 1949, in one of the village’s seven bars, Katharina’s father had uttered in the presence of the farmer Scheumel thus: “socialism, my brother, must not be as bad as they say!” (p. 131).

“Sins” more or less the same are attached to Mariana’s biography:

“Philip himself (Mariana’s lover, my note – V. D.) had admitted that Mariana had left him, causing him a real shock.” (p. 20).

“Mariana had wanted to ruin her friend’s happiness”. (p. 34).

“Happiness-destroyer Mariana, a symbol of perversion, that achieved to be called ‘the lure’, ‘donna fatal’, and even ‘murderous beauty’.” (p. 48).

“...as he was walking beside her, he slapped her thighs, whispering: ‘look at what you have here!’” (p. 59).

“It could be said that from now on Mariana had really become flawed. She was taking the shadow of an immoral woman, one who causes disputes among men.” (p. 65).

“Where are we, cried one of them, are we in Italy or Switzerland, for such things to be allowed?”. (p. 80).

When one reads, sees and finds such parallels, in two different works, where the protagonists are hit in the same dives: in morality – their immorality, their honour – their dishonesty, it is impossible not to compare the arsenal of means and methods that take part in such a mask ball. The attack against them has now taken a campaign character. Spite, slander, intrigues and fabrications; threats and blackmail are of the most ordinary. Scenes and behind the scenes interact as in a drama or theatre show, where, on middle scenes, also tools which are allowed and prohibited, legal and illegal as well as provocative and accusing letters are introduced.

IV. Symbolic Representation

Both Katharina and Mariana serve as symbols of resistance against societal prejudice and stereotypes, albeit in different cultural contexts. Katharina’s character represents a direct challenge to a society that vilifies female autonomy, while Mariana becomes a tragic emblem of the risks women face when they do not conform to social expectations. Katharina’s story, framed by her assertiveness and moral conviction, underscores the societal paranoia surrounding female independence. Mariana’s experiences, marked by subtle acts of defiance and personal pride, portray a quieter but equally powerful resistance. These characters encapsulate the psychological burden and societal costs of nonconformity, revealing the impact of stereotypes and societal judgment on women who strive to assert their identity outside the prescribed roles.

V. Conclusion

The journeys of Katharina Blum and Mariana, as crafted by Heinrich Böll and Ismail Kadare, illustrate more than individual stories of women caught in the crosshairs of societal judgment. They embody a universal struggle faced by women in various cultures and time periods: the challenge of resisting imposed roles and prejudices while asserting one's identity. By placing these female characters at the center of their narratives, both authors confront deeply ingrained stereotypes that cast women either as morally compromised or as passive figures molded by societal expectations. The portrayal of Katharina and Mariana reveals the limitations placed on women who dare to step outside their prescribed roles, showing how society's expectations continue to be a formidable force in shaping individual lives (Böll, 2007; Kadare, 2004).

Katharina's and Mariana's experiences serve as reflections of broader social anxieties about female independence, autonomy, and agency. Society's collective gaze scrutinizes, judges, and ultimately condemns these women not necessarily for their actions but for what they represent – an unsettling defiance of gender norms. Böll's Katharina Blum is a woman whose independence becomes a threat to the social fabric, her reputation tarnished by rumors and her character dismantled by those around her (Böll, 2007, p. 120). Kadare's Mariana faces a similar fate, as the mere suggestion of her independence and beauty invites scorn and moral policing, ultimately casting her as a destabilizing force within a society resistant to change (Kadare, 2004, p. 66). In both narratives, the protagonists symbolize society's inclination to ostracize women who embody traits associated with autonomy and assertiveness, qualities that challenge traditional gender roles (Moi, 1985).

In a broader literary context, Katharina and Mariana represent a shift from passive female archetypes to characters actively engaged in confronting societal constraints. They are not merely objects of narrative; they drive the narrative's critique of societal norms, with their experiences acting as catalysts for readers to question their own cultural assumptions about women's roles (Cixous, 1985). Their stories underscore how literature serves as a powerful tool to expose and question societal injustices, using fictional characters to highlight real-world struggles. Through these protagonists, Böll and Kadare demonstrate the destructive consequences of unchecked prejudice, challenging readers to reconsider how society's expectations of women can harm not only individuals but the societal fabric as a whole.

Furthermore, Katharina and Mariana's stories underline the resilience required to withstand societal pressure and the emotional toll that comes with defying oppressive norms. Böll and Kadare, through their nuanced portrayals, reveal that resistance often comes at a high price – social isolation, character assassination, and psychological trauma (Alimani, 2005, p. 263). Yet, despite these consequences, both protagonists maintain their integrity, symbolizing the strength and agency that lie within the act of defiance itself. This enduring resilience, even in the face of overwhelming societal condemnation, makes Katharina and Mariana powerful literary symbols of courage and autonomy (Böll, 2007, p. 95; Kadare, 2004, p. 101).

In conclusion, *The Lost Honour of Katharina Blum* and *A Moonlit Night* serve as literary testaments to the enduring struggle of women to assert their identity within patriarchal societies. Katharina and Mariana challenge the reader to confront the stereotypes and societal expectations that continue to marginalize women. Their stories remind us of the importance of empathy, understanding, and the need to dismantle prejudice and stereotypes in the pursuit of a more equitable society. Through these narratives, Böll and Kadare not only critique societal norms but also call for a reevaluation of the roles women are expected to play – roles that, when resisted, reveal the depth of prejudice that still exists beneath the surface of society. As symbols of prejudice and resilience, Katharina and Mariana inspire a reflection on the power of literature to illuminate social truths and to champion the voices of those who resist marginalization (Moi, 1985; Cixous, 1986).

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