

The portrayal of the “New Woman” in Joseph Conrad’s *The Arrow of Gold* and Halide Edip Adivar’s *Handan*¹

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Abstract

There are striking resemblances regarding the role of women and the constitution of the female subject in European and late Ottoman societies at the turn of the century as represented in Joseph Conrad’s *The Arrow of Gold* and Halide Edip Adivar’s *Handan*. Both Handan and Rita struggle to establish themselves as independent subjects in societies where they are basically perceived and treated as objects. Seeking to assert their individual identities as “New Women”, Rita and Handan stray from the well-trodden path and openly challenge patriarchal structures that marginalise women. Yet, they are also torn by inner turmoil that results from the conflict between traditional female roles their society expects them to play and their desire for an authentic, fluid identity. Whereas Rita is able to exercise relatively more agency and ends up following her own path in the end of the novel, Handan can only find release in death. Thus, Handan fails to make the vital transformational shift from seeing herself as the helpless victim and as not good enough to deeply honoring and respecting herself as a whole. In what follows, I comparatively examine Rita and Handan as discursive constructions of the New Woman in fiction and examine ways in which the New Woman protagonists in these novels internalise or challenge dominant gender norms and discourses of their milieu.

Keywords: *The Arrow of Gold*, *Handan*, new woman, identity.

Joseph Conrad’ın *Altın Ok* ve Halide Edip Adivar’ın *Handan* isimli eserlerinde “Yeni Kadın”

Öz

Joseph Conrad’ın *Altın Ok* ve Halide Edip Adivar’ın *Handan* isimli eserlerinde 19. yüzyıl sonu Avrupa ve Geç Osmanlı toplumlarında kadının rolü ve kadın öznenin kurgulanması açısından dikkat çekici benzerlikler vardır. Hem Rita hem de Handan onları obje olarak algılayan ve buna göre davranan toplumlarda kendilerini müstakil özneler olarak tesis etmekte zorluk çekerler. “Yeni Kadın” olarak bireysel kimliklerini vurgulamak isteyen Rita ve Handan, çoğunluğun takip ettiği yoldan çıkarak kadınları ötekileştiren ataerkil yapılara açık bir şekilde meydan okurlar. Yine de, toplumlarının onlara dayattığı geleneksel kadın rolleri ve arzu ettikleri otantik, sabit olmayan kimlik arzuları arasında sıkışıp kaldıkları için içsel çalkantı hissederler. Rita görece olarak daha fazla kendi seçimleri doğrultusunda yolunu çizebilirken, Handan kurtuluşu ancak ölümden bulur. Bu anlamda Handan, kendini yetersiz ve çaresiz bir kurban olarak görmeyi bırakıp, kendini bütünüyle kabul edip saygı

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duymasını mümkün kılacak hayati değişim sürecini gerçekleştiremez. Bu makalede, Rita ve Handan karakterlerinin temsil ettiği "Yeni Kadın" tiplemesi karşılaştırmalı bakış açısıyla incelenerek, bu kişilerin dönemlerinin baskın cinsiyet normları ve söylemlerini ne ölçüde içselleştirip, bunlara ne ölçüde meydan okudukları tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *Altın Ok*, *Handan*, yeni kadın, kimlik.

Introduction

Set in Marseilles during the third Carlist Revolt, Joseph Conrad's *The Arrow of Gold* (1919) is a romantic tale of adventure which revolves around the central figure of Dona Rita de Lastaola who is adored by many for her mesmerising beauty and charm. Mills observes she is "an admirable find" (Conrad, 2015: 23), George and Captain Blunt desire to be with her while her obsessive cousin Ortega angrily declares she is a "whore". Although Rita is continuously "constructed as the object of the male gaze and male discourse" (Hampson, 1992: 254) throughout the novel, she ultimately remains unfathomable. As Madame Leonore aptly observes: "She is for no man! She would be vanishing out of their hands like water that cannot be held" (Conrad, 2015: 145).

Widely regarded as a leading Turkish feminist and female novelist, Halide Edip Adıvar tells the tragic story of a young woman who is similarly dissected by the male gaze in her critically acclaimed 1912 novel *Handan*. Well versed in several disciplines including sociology, philosophy and history, Handan stands out as a remarkably intelligent and passionate person who tries to find her authentic self as a New Woman in late Ottoman society. Handan is first courted by her tutor Nazım, a left-wing anarchist, who envisions the bright and well educated Handan as his future comrade in arms and proposes to her. Handan refuses Nazım because she feels he does not love her for who she is and later marries Hüsnü Pasha who simply sees her as a sexual object and cheats on her regularly with several different women. Both Nazım and Hüsnü Pasha fail to see Handan as an individual and appreciate the complexity of her inner life. Even the seemingly more perceptive Refik Cemal is bothered by Handan's character which he finds to be "too strong for a woman" (Conrad, 2015: 25). Although Refik Cemal constantly criticizes his wife Neriman for her lack of intellectual sophistication, he finds his intellectual "equal" Handan to be arrogant, cold and selfish. Refik Cemal further demonizes Handan as a monster and a *femme fatale* who lacks traditional female qualities such as softness and compassion.

There are striking resemblances as well as differences regarding the role of women and the constitution of the female subject in European and late Ottoman societies at the turn of the century as represented in these two novels. In this sense, a comparative reading of the two novels informed by a cross-cultural perspective would offer new insights into these books individually and also illuminate how works of literature enable us to see points of connection and repeating themes in diverse cultures. As Zhang Longxi, a leading scholar in the field of east-west cross-cultural studies, suggests:

the point of reading across cultures is to reach a truly global vision of human creativity, and only from such a broad perspective can we fully appreciate literary works and forms in all their diversities, and appreciate them not as isolated monads sealed off from one another, but as expressions of themes and ideas that are deeply connected, even though manifested in different languages and cultures (2007: 37).

Indeed, *Handan* and *The Arrow of Gold* deal with similar themes and ideas that are "deeply connected" although the books are situated in different cultural contexts. Both Rita and Handan embody many qualities of the New Woman described by DeKoven as "independent, educated, (relatively)sexually

liberated, oriented more toward productive life in the public sphere than toward reproductive life at home” (quoted in Harrington, 2017: 174). Rita and Handan boldly challenge gendered social scriptures and resist men’s repeated attempts to control them. Yet despite their best efforts, they cannot avoid being treated as objects rather than persons and their actions are “circumscribed within the boundaries of what their societies allow them as women” (Peters, 2006: 112).

Adopting a cross-cultural perspective and drawing on the work of Zhang Longxi, this article comparatively examines Rita and Handan as discursive constructions of the New Woman in fiction and interrogates ways in which the New Woman protagonists in these novels internalise or challenge dominant gender norms and discourses of their milieu. I argue that the portrayal of the New Woman in both novels is complex and fragmented since both novels not only address but also problematize the image of the New Woman in their societies.

Asking whether one should put emphasis on difference or on affinity between the the things we bring into comparison in comparative studies, Longxi suggests: “This is a question that not only often gets asked by students in practice, but also has real methodological and theoretical implications. Things are of course *either* different *or* similar, and very often they are both different with distinctive features and comparable in certain aspects” (2015: 47, *italics original*). Within this framework, it is possible to argue that juxtaposing Handan’s story with that of Rita’s reveals that these heroines’ experiences in male-dominated society and their personal search for an authentic existence bear remarkable similarities despite the “distinctive features” of their cultures and their life journeys. This cross-cultural perspective is mind opening since:

reading across cultures will make it possible for us to see the connection of literary works, to explore poetic images and literary themes with the exciting sense of a new discovery, as though we are seeing and understanding some of the great works of literature for the first time, and in ways that are not available when we are boxed up in the narrow mental space of cultural dichotomy and parochialism. Indeed, reading across cultures will make us better readers (Longxi, 2007: 56).

Rita: “The Woman of all Times” under the male gaze

In the words of Sally Ledger:

The New Woman of the fin de siecle had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women’s movement (1997: 1).

Ledger further observes that the New Woman was largely a discursive phenomenon with an elusive quality, and that “all that was certain was that she was dangerous, a threat to the *status quo*” (11). The cognitively complex and autonomous Rita who is “so varied in her simplicity” (Conrad, 2015: 12), is a striking fictional example of the New Woman. She occupies the center stage of action from the beginning to the end and stands as a remarkable person of considerable cognitive complexity as well as an otherworldly mystique. In a letter to Everett, Conrad writes:

And indeed [The Arrow of Gold] may be best described as the Study of a Woman who might have been a very brilliant phenomenon but has remained obscure, playing her little part in the Carlist war of ’75 and then going as completely out of the very special world which knew her as though she had returned in despair to the goats of her childhood in some lonely valley on the southslope of the Pyrennes. The book, however, is but slightly concerned with her public (so to speak) activity, which was really of a secret nature. What it deals with is her private life; her sense of her own position, her sentiments and her fears (qtd in Geddes, 1975: 175).

Originally of peasant stock, Rita is discovered by the illustrious and incredibly wealthy Henry Allegre in a chance encounter in his garden. Allegre is immediately struck by her upon sight and takes her with him to back to Paris. Early on in the novel, we read that Allegre "couldn't bear women about his person. But then apparently he couldn't bear this one out of sight" (Conrad, 2015: 12). He is moreover the first in the line of numerous others to see in this girl "something of the women of all time" (13). This rather cryptic remark is later explained by Mrs. Blunt who observes:

I suppose [Allegre] meant the inheritance of all the gifts that make up an irresistible fascination – a great personality. Such women are not born often. Most of them lack opportunities. They never develop. They end obscurely. Here and there one survives to make her mark even in history.... And even then that is not a very enviable fate. They are at another pole from the so-called dangerous women who are merely coquettes. A coquette has got to work for her success. The others have nothing to do but simply exist (61).

As Geddes maintains, the quality of timelessness Allegre sees in Rita "compels both admiration and possession" (1975: 175). In fact, throughout the novel, Rita is both perceived and treated like an invaluable work of art. We read that she was the girl

the privileged personalities great in art, in letters, in politics, or simply in the world, could see on the big sofa during the gatherings in Allegre's exclusive Pavillion: the Dona Rita of their respectful adresses, manifest and mysterious, like an object of art from some unknown period; the Dona Rita of the initiated Paris. Dona Rita and nothing more – unique and indefinable (Conrad, 2015: 15).

Rita's appraisal of herself is understandably influenced by men's perceptions and treatment of her as well as the intellectual climate she is exposed to so early in life. As Mills aptly puts it: "A person of imagination, a young, virgin intelligence, steeped for nearly five years in the talk of Allegre's studio, where every hard truth had been cracked and every belief had been worried into sheds" (21). Thus, Rita's mind is fundamentally shaped by Allegre's "complete, equable, and impartial contempt for all mankind" (27). Having been robbed of comforting illusions, the enchanting Rita becomes increasingly disenchanted with life and people despite all the admiration and adoration she is regularly showered with. Although Rita becomes more cynical and guarded, she remains honest and sticks with her principles, not allowing the world to corrupt her. As Mills astutely observes: "She's not the person to lie about her own sensations" (15). He also notes "Her shrinking from all falsehood and evasion, her dread of insincerity and disloyalty of every kind" (31). For a man like Mills, it is not only her dazzling beauty but more so the force of her personality and the strength of her character that render Rita exceptional.

Following Allegre's death, Rita inherits not only his big fortune but also his friends and connections. And rather than finding herself a suitable husband or living a carefree life of pleasure, she gets involved with politics, deciding to put her wealth and considerable influence in the service of reinstating Don Carlos to the Spanish throne. By boldly getting involved with politics, she does indeed get involved with men's business and she does it with exceptional zeal and determination. She becomes, in other words, a woman of action who moves with such grace and ease in the so-called "man's world". In the words of Blunt: "She can get anything she likes in Paris. She could get a whole army over the frontier if she liked [...] She accomplishes most extraordinary things, as naturally as buying a pair of gloves.. when it's done she will hardly know herself" (21). Ironically, the inheritance that gives her the freedom to move and act freely as she wishes also renders Rita vulnerable. As Guerard points out, "The fortune she inherits from Allegre corresponds closely to other Conradian treasures: Kurtz's ivory, Nostromo's silver and Peyrol's gold. It gives her the means to exercise her choice, once she becomes her own mistress, and makes her, like Nostromo, an object of power and interest" (1965: 248). All in all, the fortune Rita inherits is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, financial security empowers Rita as a woman and allows her to

resist male domination. Yet her spectacular wealth also turns her into a subject of interest, gossip and speculation. Thus, it comes hardly as a surprise that after Allegré’s death, Rita feels instinctively that her only protection was obscurity (Conrad, 2015: 31).

A very important factor that must have played a huge role in the formation of Rita’s character and identity is the absence of women in her life from the very beginning. She is an orphan so she lacks a mother figure who she could observe as a role model. Her sister Therese, on the other hand, is a religious zealot who envies and quite possibly hates her. So Rita grows up and continues to live with men and surrounded by men without a woman soul “in which perhaps I could have seen my own reflection” (31). By her own admission, Rita is a “nomad” (35) who refuses to take root in any place with any man for longer than she deems necessary. In this sense, she embodies the wanderer archetype whose energy comes from being the outsider (Pearson, 1989: 52). Rita sees in George a kindred spirit, observing that George too is a “heartless vagabond like myself”. The thing that binds them so strongly together is indeed a mutually acknowledged kinship, a strong sense of familiarity. For the first time in her life Rita experiences with George a relief of mental ease and intimacy (72) and appreciates the “frankness of gestures and and speeches and thoughts” that they share. “No, you were always your own self,” she tells him “unwise and reckless and with something in it kindred to mine” (Conrad, 2015: 72). In a very heated scene towards the end of the book as Rita prepares to leave, George reproaches her in desperation:

What are the motives of your speeches? What prompts your actions? On your own showing your life seems to be a continuous running away. You have just run away from Paris. Where will you run tomorrow? What are you everlastingly running from – or is it that you are running after something? What is it? A man, a phantom – or some sensation that you don’t like to own to? (94).

These series of questions reveal how well George has understood the contradictory impulses that motivate Rita’s behavior. Rita does indeed love George but she is not the kind of romantic who can love him simply and blindly. George also seems to have grasped the fact that Rita is split between a yearning to be deeply seen and a desire to be invisible. In her case, distancing seems to be a form of hiding. Thus, her core strategy of distancing as a way of protecting herself is deeply woven into the fabric of her being.

On his behalf, George too suffers from ambivalence. On the one hand, he feels “there was nothing more lovable in the world than that woman; nothing more life-giving, inspiring, and illuminating than the emanation of her charm” (43). Yet on the other, he is intimidated, perhaps even enraged, by her elusiveness and unreadability: “With her one could not tell. Sorrow, indifference, tears, smiles, all with her seemed to have a hidden meaning. Nothing could be trusted” (56). During a heated conversation with Rita, George notes the following after he attacks her for disdain his love and embracing him for the sake of the king:

She listened to me unreadable, unmoved, narrowed eyes, closed lips, slightly flushed face, as if carved six thousand years ago in order to fix for ever that something secret and obscure which is in all women. Not the gross immobility of a Sphinx proposing roadside riddles but the finer immobility, almost sacred, of a fateful figure seated at the very source of the passions that have moved men from the dawn of ages (50).

George finds himself on an emotional roller coaster from the day he first meets Rita and gets involved with the gunrunning scheme for her sake alone. George is not simply infatuated or in love, he is quite clearly drawn to what many perceive and experience as her divine feminine essence.

Challenging George’s attempts to antagonise her, Rita boldly tells him: “You will never forget me. Evil or good. But, my dear, I feel neither an evil nor a sham. I have got to be what I am, and that, amigo, is

not to so easy; because I may be simple, but like all those on whom there is no peace I am not One. No, I am not One!" (96). So Rita acutely feels that she is, in fact, a multiplicity guided by an inner committee that can have divergent opinions. I would suggest that Rita's real strength reflects a strong, conscious container that embraces all parts of self. Since to her own self alone she remains true, the events in her life bring her more self awareness and a sense of inner power. Thus, everything she survives makes her stronger. Yet this self she has cultivated in time is a work in progress, always evolving and never complete. As Susan Jones argues, Rita's

sense of a fragmented identity, represented in the novel by her refusal to command a definitive space, creates an unsettling dislocation at the centre of the romance plot. Continuously moving between Paris, Marseilles, and her native Tolosa, she behaves much more like the restless hero of romantic poetry, while her quest is not to pursue the idea of an essential self, but rather to escape from it (1999: 174).

From this perspective, it is only in the freedom of constant movement that Rita finds herself although she also remains very much grounded in her own truth:

I have suffered domination and it didnt crush me because I have been strong enough to live with it; I have known caprice, you may call it folly if you like, and it left me unharmed because I was great enough not to be captured by anything that wasnt really worthy of me. My dear, it went down like a house of cards before my breath. There is something in me that will not be dazzled by any sort of prestige in this world, worthy or unworthy (Conrad, 2015: 69).

As revealed in this quote, one of the most remarkable things about Rita is that she never loses her faith in her ability to survive in the world. She is able to stand her ground and in her power mainly because she is not consumed with what others think. Rita is a woman who does not need or seek self-validation or identification through her relationship with a male. She will not compromise her desires in her dealings with men and therefore, always remains in control of her relationships with them. Neither does she repress her fears or anxieties during times of hardship and stress. Cultivating and owning these qualities in herself no matter the cost or consequence, Rita is able to use everything in her life to foster more resilience, courage and core strength. And since she always stands in her own center, the challenges she encounters do not crush her but rather contribute to her self-development.

Although Rita is very cerebral and spends a lot of time in her head, with George her center of gravity moves from her head to her heart. Although her experience with him blasts her open to love, she does not hesitate to leave him behind at the end of the novel. When George goes into town to run some errands, he hears from an acquaintance that Blunt is circulating rumors about how George is exploiting Rita financially. As a man of integrity, George cannot let this slander pass by without taking any action so he is forced to call Blunt for a duel to clean his name. George is wounded during the duel and Rita nurses him until he recovers. After he gains his full consciousness, George is devastated to find out that Rita is gone for good. The doctor who tends to George's wounds is the very same doctor who was called when Ortega shot himself in Rita's house following a desperate attempt on his part to reach her with insults, pleas and manipulation. The doctor is tempted to remark that "She will go on like this leaving a track behind her and then some day there will be really a corpse" (111). Mills, who can read and understand Rita better than any other person in the book, tells him: "It is easy to blame her, but, as she asked me despairingly, could she go through life veiled from head to foot or go out of it altogether into a convent? No she isn't guilty. She is simply – what she is" (111). And when the doctor inquires as to what that is Mill simply says: "Very much of a woman. Perhaps a little more at the mercy of contradictory impulses than other women. But that's not her fault. I really think she's been honest" (111). Mills is also

right in asserting that Rita is “a most unfortunate creature” who will never find love again because she sacrificed that chance to the integrity of George’s life, and she did it “heroically” (112).

Although she is often “objectified, appropriated and stifled by the male company in which she is immersed” (Levin, 2004: 127), Rita shows a remarkable ability and willingness to discern who she is against what everyone thinks about who she is. All in all, Rita ventures into the world to find herself, combats fear and doubt, reclaims her power everytime it is challenged by outside parties, and demonstrates her strength and fierce love by surrendering to her feelings for George. Resisting all attempts to encapsulate her in a frozen image, Rita experiences herself as an unfolding event rather than a fixed and stable entity. I agree with Susan Jones that Rita, who “provides an alternative to the self-sacrificing Conradian heroine” (1999: 173), also “evades the traditional closure of the romance heroine, ultimately choosing a solitary path” (49).

***Handan*: The tragic story of a gifted woman**

Written in epistolary form, *Handan* is a multi-voiced narrative that allows us to see the central character and the New Woman phenomenon she represents from multiple points of view. Handan’s own letters and diary entries, on the other hand, give us deeper insights into the restless mind of a young woman who desperately tries to resist various oppressive conventions rooted in her culture. According to Atabağsoy, *Handan* is an important work because it deals with the westernization of women in a radical way and reveals how the “westernized” man cannot accept the “westernized” woman due to her “westernized” identity (2019: 69-70).³ The writer of the novel, Halide Edip Adivar, is one of the educated Ottoman women who was hailed as the prototypic example of “the ideal/mythic nationalist woman’ who, according to male nationalists, was expected to be educated, well-read, but also ‘chaste’ and ‘passive’” (Adak, 2001: 96). Born in 1884, Adivar was not only a prolific writer of fiction but also a soldier, a columnist, a passionate public speaker, as well as an educator and political dissident later in life. In the words of ÖnerToy: “Halide Edip is the first woman writer to consciously and comprehensively deal with social problems in her novels” (2011: 38). What Halide Edip aimed to construct and promote throughout her life and career was an alternative and fundamentally hybrid new female identity which embodied a compromise between the values of the east and the west: this ideal woman was to be modernized and progressive in thought, yet also cognizant of and faithful to social and cultural values as well as Islamic norms.

As Eleman maintains:

the image of the New Woman in the Ottoman Empire emerged as an outcome of the modernization process that started with the Tanzimat reforms (1839). During the modernization process, the woman question became a subject of much debate and the intellectuals and reformists of the period began to criticise the lower status of women in Ottoman society (2012: 29).

However,

Although the Ottoman intellectuals came to realise the oppression of the Ottoman family structure within which women had no chance to develop their own independent identity, the reformist Turkish writers and journalists could never oppose the fundamental norms and Islamic regulations concerning women (Safarian in Eleman 2012: 30).

³ All translations from Turkish sources quoted in the article are mine.

In this respect, Halide Edip's treatment of the woman question is similarly limited in its critique of social norms and conventions.

As with Rita in *The Arrow of Gold*, we initially learn about Handan from others' point of view. Her cousin Neriman, who acts as a foil to Handan throughout the novel, represents traditional womanhood and is deeply adored by his newly wedded husband Refik Cemal who observes:

There is this plain and unassuming adaptation to life in Neriman – I wonder if all girls who are brought up with English manners have this quality. There is also something in her soul that is yearning to be obedient to the man she loves. If I were a cruel husband, I could oppress Neriman. And she would endure all of it with those beloved, clear eyes. I am deeply grateful for this girl who has for ever snatched me away from the clutches of those women who turn life into torture and fiery hell (Adıvar, 2007: 21).

Neriman does indeed seem to be the "ideal" wife in a society where women were expected to accept and sheepishly conform to their socio-culturally designated roles such as being the obedient and self-sacrificing wife and mother, a good housekeeper and the keeper of moral purity and virtue. Although Refik Cemal is strongly appreciative of all of these traditional qualities in her, he has misgivings about her intellectual capacity: "She gets bored of sociology, does not really like history, and starts falling asleep as soon as I start reading philosophy. She likes literature quiet a bit and that is mainly due to the influence of Handan. This woman must have a strong personality, a personality too strong for a woman" (24).

Like his friend Server, Refik Cemal harbors considerable resentment towards Handan since he strongly feels that she led their mutual friend Nazım to commit suicide by rejecting his love. Yet he cannot help but also feel intrigued by this woman who is deeply loved and admired by his wife Neriman. When he finally meets Handan in France he observes:

Handan is a good, polite, smart woman; but I cannot really call her a woman. One cannot really think she is a woman when she is talking or thinking.... Handan has this self-confidence and sense of responsibility that a woman her age is not supposed to have; that such a young woman has these qualities drives me both to rebellion and pity simultaneously. Women are always supposed to be delicate and seek shelter under a man's wings, isn't that so Neriman? (35).

Refik Cemal's ambivalent feelings about Handan take another turn when he gets the chance to spend more time with her at the hotel where she is staying with her husband. He mostly ignores Hüsnü (the husband) and spends hours talking with Handan about various subjects including sociology, philosophy even politics. As they are conversing, he also discovers –to his considerable surprise – that their minds are perfectly matched. He is moreover taken aback by Handan's sensuality and free manners. Yet, despite his apparent fascination, he remains sceptical of her as he feels he cannot tell what dubious motivations lurk in her soul. Thus, he wonders: "What if Handan is one of these seductresses who ensnare some men with the quality of her mind, and some others with her spirit and education? Is she a dishonest creature?" (37).

Handan is far from being a dishonest creature and frequently gets into trouble – especially with her husband – because she openly speaks her mind. Almost from the very beginning of their marriage, Handan defiantly stands up against her narcissistic and emotionally abusive husband who cannot bear her strong willed resistance to his promiscuity and double standards. Hüsnü openly and freely sleeps with several women, yet he also scolds Handan for supposedly flirting with Refik Cemal. Fully convinced that it is impossible to expect a man to be faithfully committed to one woman alone – an idea that was

espoused by many regardless of gender in a society that legitimised polygamy – Hüsnü is scandalised by Handan’s indignation and rage at his behavior. Even when he eventually leaves Handan in England to live with his latest English mistress in France, he rests assured that Handan will eternally remain faithful to him as his wife. Rejecting Handan’s offer to meet him in Paris, he bluntly says: “[...] I will not live with you. But you are mine and will remain so. You will never be another man’s woman” (139). For Hüsnü, Handan is quite simply an object he possesses, not an individual with her own agency, values and personal desires. But Handan boldly challenges and rejects male authority, refusing to play the role of the dutiful wife who is passive and submissive. She strikes back at him saying: “You are such a strange man Hüsnü! You are cruel and cunning, on the one hand you want to keep me, yet on the other you push me away!” (124).

So Handan refuses to comply with her husband’s humiliating ultimatums, yet this final rejection by him becomes the last blow to her already failing nerves. Neither can Handan pursue personal freedom as she is expected to remain in this marriage no matter how unfulfilling it may be. As Pearson maintains, “When people have grown up in an environment that glorifies martyrdom, being good, and making others happy, their desire for autonomy and independence will be interpreted, even by themselves, as wrong” (1989: 64). Handan grows up in such an environment where she is taught that being a good woman tends to mean forgoing one’s own quest to please others. Having internalized the values of society, she aborts her own quest and is stuck in this situation. Unlike Rita, who has mobility and exercises - at least some - agency, Handan cannot escape the vicious circle she is trapped in.

Handan does indeed get very sick and is looked after by her cousin Neriman and Refik Cemal in England. During this period when Handan loses her memory she and her primary caretaker Refik Cemal get increasingly, and rather dangerously, close. It is, in fact, Refik Cemal who ends up taking her to Sicily for treatment when the doctors advise it as a last resort. While in Sicily, the connection between them gets even stronger leading ultimately to declarations of love and physical intimacy. Handan soon starts showing signs of recovery, yet when she also starts remembering what she and Refik Cemal have done, she plunges further into deeper darkness due to feelings of shame and guilt. She is increasingly engulfed by feelings of self-loathing and also desperation knowing that she can never pursue her love for her beloved cousin’s husband. In brief, doing something misaligned with her values leads her to hate herself as she gradually loses her sense of who she really is: “This Handan is supposed to be me. Yet how strange, it’s as if Handan is hidden behind a heavy curtain I cannot lift inside me” (Adivar, 2015: 189). Unable to free herself from the mindset of resistance and judgement and fixating on her internal voices that pull her in several directions, she dies quite unexpectedly in Sicily.

Although she is a sophisticated young woman who dazzles men with the width and depth of her learning and intelligence, Handan is never really allowed to be who she really is. The qualities that men admire in her are also reason for them to suspect her and feel intimidated by her. It is thus possible to conclude that her tragic demise is brought about by her inability to reconcile her contradictory inner impulses with the equally contradictory demands placed on her by the people, especially by the men in her life. As the rift between her individual desires and societal expectations deepen, Handan progressively loses her hold on life as she feels increasingly alienated both from others and herself. Handan is ultimately unable to pursue the life that would make her feel better, stronger and more complete. So, at least on a subconscious level, Handan chooses death instead of living death in life. As she descends more and more into her mental inferno, Handan’s interiority reflects her conflicting emotions that pull her in several different directions: “In this sense we can read her inner turmoil, mental breakdown and ultimate death as expressions of her desire to transgress the conventions of her society” (Eleman, 2012:103).

Unlike Rita who owns herself in her entirety, Handan cannot make peace with or silence her internal victim and her internal judge. She is constantly presented with situations that prevent her from pursuing what she really wants in the present moment. Her perception is so narrowed by her conditioning and deep rooted belief systems that she cannot see any other option of how to be. Consequently, she cannot unravel her authentic choice from her strategies and adopted beliefs. Since she cannot break down her old confining structures, she cannot truly inhabit her essential nature. She cannot tame her internal demons including – mainly - anger, judgement, frustration, fear and guilt. Engulfed with feelings of self-loathing and self-pity, she turns against herself. In a sense, it turns out to be her opinions about herself, rather than other people's opinions about her that ultimately lead to her undoing. Although she refuses to be a slave to other people's ideas about how she should think and feel, Handan still remains trapped in outdated belief systems that limit her mobility in mind and body. As Şahin maintains, Halide Edip portrays harsh truths about the human condition through Handan whose process of self-actualisation leads to her tragic destruction (2008: 112).

Ultimately, Handan's eventual death can be interpreted as the ultimate escape, a clear exit from a world in which she is not given the chance to be and live as herself, with integrity. On the one hand, she refuses to become something she is not in order to be accepted. Yet on the other, she cannot definitively relinquish who she thinks she should be in favor of who she is. According to Argunşah, Handan is the most impressive female character Halide Edip Adıvar created:

What makes her impressive is that she stands for the tragedy of the woman of her era. Handan represents the annihilation of the woman who has accomplished the mental transformation in accordance with the demands of her day and age, yet who has not been able to reap the rewards of her efforts (2015: 38).

Conclusion

Through the fascinating portrayals of Rita and Handan, both *The Arrow of Gold* and *Handan* inquire what it means to be a "New Woman" in European and late Ottoman societies at the turn of the century. Although I have situated the heroines in their specific cultural traditions, my reading of the two novels sought to highlight the similarities in their experiences as strong-willed New Women who try to find their authentic voice in male-dominated European and late Ottoman societies. I would argue that a cross-cultural comparative analysis of *Handan* and *The Arrow of Gold* is a particularly stimulating experience since:

Such textual encounters clearly demonstrate the unexpected affinities of ideas and expressions in very different literary and cultural traditions. To understand different texts in depth requires situating them in their own specific contexts and circumstances, but beyond their differences thematic patterns will emerge to put them in perspective and reveal the surprising similarities in the workings of the human mind, the affinities in imagination and human creativity (Longxi, 2007: 89).

Although the conception of the New Woman in these novels does not overlap completely, interesting parallels can be observed in the treatment of the female protagonists as representatives of this type. Both heroines struggle to establish themselves as independent subjects in societies where they are basically perceived and treated as objects. As fiercely independent and tough minded New Women, Rita and Handan stray from the well trodden path and openly challenge patriarchal structures that marginalise women. Yet they are also torn by inner turmoil that results from the conflict between traditional female roles their society expects them play and their desire for an authentic, fluid identity. Whereas Rita is able to exercise relatively more agency and ends up following her own path in the end of the novel, Handan can only find release in death.

Well endowed with Allegré’s fortune, Rita can afford to reject the option of marriage and domestic life as the path to a fulfilling life. Although she comes from an affluent family herself, Handan certainly does not have the chance to reject the prospect of marriage as a Muslim Turkish woman, however “new” she may be. Her subsequent entrapment in a deeply unfulfilling and dysfunctional marriage coupled with her inability to follow her passion due to feelings of guilt and shame are the main causes that lead to her untimely death. Whereas Rita is able to align with and adapt to changing circumstances, Handan cannot radically shift her perception of the world and her place in it. Thus, she fails to make the vital transformational shift from seeing herself as the helpless victim and as not good enough to deeply honoring and respecting herself as a whole.

As Longxi suggests:

the pleasure of reading across cultures is a sense of discovery, the pleasure of finding unexpected affinities of ideas and expressions in different texts. The greater the difference, the more surprising and more satisfying the affinities will be. It is like bouncing texts and ideas against one another to see what will happen from such interactions” (2007: 63).

As my comparative analysis of the two novels has shown, the Turkish New Woman could still not aspire to the level of self-actualisation that was possible at least for some of her European counterparts. Although she certainly had more access to education when compared with earlier generations of Turkish women, her options were still very limited in a socio-cultural environment where even the most progressive and liberal intellectuals continued to emphasize the significance of traditional family rules and roles over individual development and autonomy for women. Still, Rita and Handan have strikingly similar attitudes in that they both prefer and seek the company of men and display new codes of female behaviour. Within this context, the portrayals of both heroines offer a challenge to traditional discourses on femininity.

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