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## Woman's Writing and the Body in a Turkish Context: Erendiz Atasü's *The Other Side of the Mountain*

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**NIL KORKUT-NAYKI**

### Abstract

The mind–body dualism and woman's perception of her body in patriarchal culture have been major concerns for feminist thinking in the West. This essay attempts to place this issue within a non-western context through an analysis of the Turkish author Erendiz Atasü's novel, *The Other Side of the Mountain* (2000). The essay explores the way Atasü's novel employs a variety of thematic and formal devices to represent the modern emancipated Turkish woman's relationship with her body. It also discusses how these concerns manifest themselves in the 'embodied' style of writing adopted throughout. By drawing parallels between the treatment of this issue in the novel and the development of feminist theorizing about the body in the West, the essay demonstrates that Atasü's novel operates not only on a culturally specific level but also on a more universal level, making a significant literary contribution to the wider feminist project of undermining the dichotomies rooted in patriarchy.

### Introduction

Turkish author Erendiz Atasü's award-winning 1995 novel *Dağın Öteki Yüzü*, translated in English as *The Other Side of the Mountain*,<sup>1</sup> traces the lives of several generations of a Turkish family from the 1920s, when the Turkish Republic was newly founded, to the 1990s. Noted for its successful depiction of personal lives against the painful history of the developing and changing Turkish Republic, the novel has often been approached from the perspective of history, politics and ideology. This has sometimes overshadowed an equally significant dimension of the novel dealing with the changing status and condition of the modern Turkish woman. *The Other Side of the Mountain* revolves around Vicdan Hayreddin, a representative of the first emancipated women of the Turkish Republic committed to the principles of modernization and westernization promoted by the country's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Through the story of Vicdan and her daughter, who is the first-person narrator relating her family's history, the novel draws attention to issues concerning not only the emancipated woman's place in modern society but also her difficult relationship with the opposing realms of the body and the intellect and with writing as an intellectual and/or bodily creation. The

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purpose of this essay is to explore the way Atasü's novel approaches these issues, which have also preoccupied feminist thinking in the West since the first half of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the essay aims to demonstrate the masterful way Atasü makes use of both thematic and formal elements to make a significant point about woman and the body. On the other, it aims to trace the parallels between the development of feminist theorizing about the body in the West and Atasü's representation of this issue within a specifically Turkish context. The essay will first present an overview of feminist approaches to the body, especially in the second half of the twentieth century. It will then situate concerns about the body within the context of the move towards westernization and modernization initiated by the newly-founded Turkish Republic. This will be followed by an analysis of the thematic and formal strategies Atasü employs in *The Other Side of the Mountain* to represent and evaluate the problem of woman's relationship with the body.

### Feminist Approaches to the Body

Perceptions of the body in general, and of woman's body in particular, play a major role in determining woman's status within patriarchy. A widely accepted argument traces woman's perceived inferiority to the mind-body dualism that has largely characterized western thought in general, becoming even more fundamental in post-Cartesian philosophy. The mind-body dualism, like all other binaries, exhibits a hierarchical relationship. In this case, the mind is the valued term, associated with reason and rationality, and the body is its opposite, representing, in Elizabeth Grosz's words, 'an intrusion on or interference with the operation of mind, a brute givenness which requires overcoming, a connection with animality and nature that needs transcendence'.<sup>2</sup> Since the mind-body dichotomy is a part of the larger network of binaries constructed by patriarchy, it follows naturally that man belongs primarily to the realm of the mind while woman is relegated to that of the body. This separation is widely ingrained in human consciousness, being firmly rooted in ancient thought: 'From the beginnings of philosophical thought, femaleness was symbolically associated with what Reason supposedly left behind—the dark powers of the earth goddesses, immersion in unknown forces associated with mysterious female powers'.<sup>3</sup> Within this system of thought, woman is inferior to man since she is primarily an unpredictable and incoherent body; a body that is biologically so assertive and uncontrollable as to hinder any kind of intellectual activity associated with reason and rationality.

The valuing of the mind over the body and the association of the inferior term with woman were so much the norm that early second-wave feminist thought often attempted to divorce woman from the realm of the body, emphasizing woman's rights and mental abilities entitling her to the higher sphere of the mind. Simone de Beauvoir's famous dictum in *The Second Sex* that '[o]ne is not born, but rather becomes, a woman'<sup>4</sup> was undoubtedly a very significant move within feminism, introducing a revolutionary way of thinking about the status of woman in society by distinguishing between sex as a biological given and gender as a cultural construct. This dictum, nevertheless, preserved the culture-nature binary, thereby retaining the closely related mind-body dualism. Many feminists following the lead of Beauvoir focused primarily on the cultural forces leading to the marginalization of woman in society and were often inclined to disregard woman as body or preferred not to theorize about the body. In extreme cases such as that of Shulamith Firestone,<sup>5</sup> woman's body was written about but seen in a strikingly

negative light as a natural hindrance that needs to be overcome if women are to achieve better status in society. All this inevitably resulted in woman's alienation from her body. The modern, 'emancipated' woman was accepted into men's circles but at the cost of ignoring herself as a body or of becoming a de-sexed individual.

Against this tendency to disregard the body and equate it with everything that is inferior to the higher realm of the intellect, some feminists advocated a return to the body, suggesting that women must make peace with their corporeality, realizing the potentials residing in the female body. In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich asserted the need for women 'to view our physicality as a resource, rather than a destiny', to 'touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence'.<sup>6</sup> In more extreme cases the female body was glorified and woman was said to enjoy 'a privileged, superior ethical position' through her closeness to nature and her 'reproductive possibilities'.<sup>7</sup> Such attempts were useful to raise awareness about the significance of the body and the dangers of disembodiment for women, but most often they too proceeded from the nature-culture opposition, hence tending to regard the body and mind as two distinct, irreconcilable realms.

French feminists may be said to have made a major move towards addressing this problem by stressing the significance of the body while trying not to fall into the trap of setting up sharp distinctions between binaries. Especially, the work of Hélène Cixous questions all kinds of binaries that have sustained patriarchal thought. Her theory of *écriture féminine* is meant both to 'return' woman 'to the body that has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display',<sup>8</sup> and to problematize the mind-body dichotomy by asserting that woman can prove herself intellectually only if she writes through the body.<sup>9</sup> Luce Irigaray is similarly preoccupied with deconstructing binaries, which she does primarily by arguing that woman 'is definitely other in herself'<sup>10</sup> and that her writing must definitely be true to her plurality, which does not recognize patriarchal oppositions like I-other, subject-object and mind-body. More recently, this trend towards taking the body seriously while being wary of the dangers of dualism has been taken up by a considerable number of feminists, eventually leading to a body of theorizing under the title 'corporeal feminism'. In her insightful study of this kind of feminism, Elizabeth Grosz places diverse names such as Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, Jane Gallop, Moira Gatens, Vicki Kirby, Judith Butler, Naomi Schor and Monique Wittig in the same category, arguing that they all find the body 'crucial to understanding woman's psychical and social existence'.<sup>11</sup> Their work no longer approaches the body as 'an ahistorical, biologically given, acultural object' and is marked by 'a refusal or transgression of the mind/body dualism'.<sup>12</sup> Grosz's own work is also in this direction. To her, an entirely new understanding of subjectivity can be developed 'using the subject's corporeality as a framework', eventually demonstrating that '[b]odies have all the explanatory power of minds'.<sup>13</sup>

Scholarly and theoretical developments may be slow to move out of the sphere of academia to become a part of practice. Bodily alienation is still an issue for many women, especially for those who are more 'equal' and 'emancipated'. Nevertheless, it is still possible to argue that these recent directions in feminist scholarship have contributed significantly to altering women's perception of themselves as bodies. It seems that in practical life more and more women are giving this issue further thought, becoming less afraid of presenting themselves as 'sexed' individuals in environments traditionally associated with male intellectual capabilities. Literature—again a traditionally male realm—also shows signs of these positive developments. A greater number of works by women

writers exhibit a major preoccupation with issues concerning the body as well as a sincere attempt to reconcile the body with the activity of literary creation, hence problematizing the mind–body dualism and all related binaries. Such literary productions may even be regarded as diverse manifestations of Cixous’s *écriture féminine* or Irigaray’s *le parler femme*—productions that, although highly different in other respects, share a concern for being true to the body while writing.

### Turkish Woman’s Emancipation and the Body

Following the foundation of the Turkish Republic in 1923, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk initiated a series of reforms that would set Turkey on the road to becoming a modern, democratic and secular country. These reforms were implemented in a wide variety of areas, ranging from law and politics to education and social life. Atatürk was particularly concerned about the place of women in society, considering women’s emancipation as a very significant step towards modernization. In 1926 the Turkish Civil Code was passed, banning Islamic polygamy, enforcing civil marriage and granting women equal status within the family. In 1934 Turkish women gained the right to vote and to hold office. All of these contributed to improving women’s status within society. Ideas of women’s rights and equality continued to gain ground.<sup>14</sup>

The emancipation of the Turkish woman followed a course similar to her counterpart in the West. As Erendiz Atasü argues in an essay, the Kemalist reforms greatly improved the Turkish woman’s condition by emphasizing her judicial, social, educational and familial rights and highlighting her role as an intelligent, creative and responsible citizen. While attempting to place women in the intellectual domain, however, these reforms overlooked an equally significant issue—woman’s body and sexuality—eventually creating the image of the modern intellectual Turkish woman as de-sexed, without a body: ‘The female citizen of the modern Turkish Republic is symbolized by and confined to the image of the woman whose mind is appreciated but whose body is ignored’.<sup>15</sup> It is possible to place this phenomenon within the wider, more general context of patriarchy and the mind–body dualism associated with it. For Turkish women, too, the only way to be accepted into the male world of business, politics, education, literature or art was to de-emphasize their sex. Considered within a more specific context, however, Turkish women may be said to have experienced this problem even more acutely compared with their western counterparts. In the same essay, Atasü draws attention to the troubles involved in promoting women’s rights in the highly conservative society inherited from the Ottoman Empire. In such a society, women’s acceptance to social and intellectual circles was itself a highly difficult undertaking, and a topic like woman’s bodily alienation would arise infrequently if at all. Supposing it did, it would require a lot of courage to probe since woman’s relationship with her body and sexuality could easily be categorized as taboo. Even today Turkish society is largely characterized by conservative notions about women, and many ‘modern’ Turkish women would still consider it improper to foreground themselves as sexed bodies or to talk about sexuality. Psychiatrist Arşaluyş Kayr explains how Turkish families directly or indirectly teach their daughters to ignore their bodies and sexuality as they grow up.<sup>16</sup> It is no wonder, then, that today’s Turkish women commonly tend to think that their bodily identities and sexual urges are trivial and negligible (compared with men’s) and therefore easy to ignore.

Modern Turkish literature also reflects these tendencies. Until recently, woman’s body and issues of sexuality have not been the most common topics dealt with either

by male or female authors. In an article on women, psychology and literature, Bekir Onur observes that modern Turkish literature often portrays the emancipated woman as someone without emotions, as a person who dislikes sexuality and intellectualizes such experiences. This, to him, is the result of the modern Turkish writer's wish to resist patriarchal understanding, in which women are regarded as emotional beings incapable of intellectual activity. Ironically, however, such an attempt to resist patriarchy reinforces it in another way, by strengthening the image of the emancipated woman as a de-sexed individual.<sup>17</sup> One can argue that when Onur was making this valid observation in the 1980s, Turkish literature was also witnessing the gradual dissolution of this negative pattern, thanks to women writers courageous enough to weave their fiction around issues of women's bodies and their sexuality. Producing the bulk of her work from the 1970s to the 1990s, Adalet Ağaoğlu took her place among the leading Turkish women writers to dwell openly and persistently on woman's alienation from her body and her problematic relationship with sexuality. From the 1980s onwards, Ağaoğlu's example was followed by a newer generation of women writers, such as Ayla Kutlu, İnci Aral, Erendiz Atasü, Latife Tekin and Nazlı Eray, who, despite their highly different literary styles, shared a similar understanding concerning the significance of being explicit about woman's body and sexuality. Erendiz Atasü is an especially important author in this regard. Writing with a feminist sensibility, she is seriously concerned with representing woman as a sexed being and conveying her bodily experiences and sexuality in the kind of language that would be most true to women themselves. Echoing Bekir Onur's generalization above about modern Turkish literature, Atasü's *The Other Side of the Mountain* portrays its major character, Vicdan Hayreddin, as a modern, emancipated woman alienated from her body, but the novel also departs from this generalization through its serious criticism of this phenomenon. Atasü achieves all this through her highly experimental narrative strategies and stylistic preferences, which will be explored in the rest of this essay.

### **Opposing Voices: Daughter/Narrator and Mother/Protagonist**

As part of the newly founded Turkish Republic's project to provide the best kind of education to its bright young men and women, Vicdan Hayreddin, the protagonist of *The Other Side of the Mountain*, is sent at the end of the 1920s on a state scholarship to Cambridge, England to study English language and letters. Upon completing her education, she returns to Turkey and contributes to the foundation of an English Department in a well-known university in Turkey.<sup>18</sup> Later she moves from Istanbul to the capital city, Ankara, where her husband can find work more easily, and continues her career there as an educator. Vicdan is a pertinent example representing the mind-body dichotomy and other related oppositions internalized by many of the educated women of the time. As the first-person narrator, Vicdan's daughter—describing her mother's history from a higher narrative level—repeatedly makes clear, Vicdan lives by sharp distinctions between related binaries such as body and mind, body and soul, nature and culture. The narrator draws attention to Vicdan's problem with 'nature' quite early in the novel, while she is giving an account of her journey to Cambridge with a close friend, Nefise:

They boarded the Italian liner *Théophile Gautier* at Istanbul. When they stepped ashore at the port of Marseilles, Vicdan felt like kneeling down and kissing the

ground like Nefise and the other passengers, but she could not—Vicdan cannot touch soil, handle plants, pet animals; she has a secret aversion to such things.<sup>19</sup>

Later on, the narrator describes the nature of the relationship between her mother and father, stating that her mother could easily close ‘her eyes to the tottering physical aspect of their marriage’.<sup>20</sup> The description of Vicdan at her deathbed follows similar lines:

While her body was slowly passing away from life, Vicdan’s mind hovered above the ailing organism, like a meta-organ liberated from the body, continuing its slow, calm, tremulous functioning, as if intending to prove the separateness of body and soul.<sup>21</sup>

Writing about her mother and her family is a means for the narrator to explore her own self and her inclinations as a woman. That is why she sometimes compares her own life and preferences with her mother’s. Although she feels close to Vicdan in many respects, she finds it very difficult to approve or even to make sense of her notions concerning woman’s body and sexuality:

The satisfactions she [Vicdan] abstained from were not as essential to her as I took them to be. She was perfectly sincere on the conscious level when she declared [looking back on her life], ‘I have no regrets’. But what of the subconscious, the spinal cord, the muscles, veins, nerves, and blood? Her body felt estranged from her, and became ill! That ‘body’ was not a priority with her, as she belonged to the generation which divided human existence decisively into ‘body’ and ‘soul’.<sup>22</sup>

It is significant to observe here that the narrator’s criticism is directed towards not only her mother as an individual but also the whole generation of women of which her mother is a representative. The difference between mother and daughter as members of different generations interestingly echoes the development of feminist thinking in the West. Vicdan is a feminist in her own way since she is sincerely devoted to Atatürk’s project of improving Turkish women’s condition and conveying an image of the modern, educated and emancipated Turkish woman to the whole world. She is, however, of the generation that has internalized deep-rooted dichotomies and their sexual associations, so it never occurs to her that while gaining her well-deserved place among (male) intellectual circles she is alienating herself from her body. If Vicdan stands for earlier feminist thinking that disregards the body, her daughter represents later trends that question traditional dichotomies, foreground the body and emphasize its importance for the feminist project. Being a writer herself, the daughter may also be considered representative of the new generation of Turkish women writers, who openly and courageously probe the question of woman’s body and sexuality. She is acutely aware of the dangers involved in binary thinking and degrading the body, and a major aim she sets for herself throughout is to heighten the reader’s awareness of this issue. When she wishes to be very explicit in her criticism, she interrupts the flow of events and addresses Vicdan directly as though Vicdan could hear her. In such instances, the use of parentheses is the only indication that the narrator is upsetting narrative conventions by moving from her own narrative plane to Vicdan’s. A good example can be found early in the novel as the narrator relates the conversation between Vicdan and her Turkish friend,

Nefise, about a ball they attended during their Cambridge years. Deep down Vicdan is upset because Hugh Eliot, the English gentleman in love with her, has asked Nefise to go to the ball with him upon being rejected by Vicdan. Following the night of the ball, Nefise describes to her friend her romance with another man, a British lieutenant named Ted Campbell. Vicdan is very angry to hear that Nefise is entertaining thoughts of marrying him:

Nefise (*whispering*): We [Ted and I] kissed.

Vicdan (*still indignant*): How can you believe promises made under the spell of wine on a romantic evening? India ... What the hell are you going to do in any part of the British Empire ... Ohhhh, those bloody British, and their damnable Empire! ... How long, do you think, can they go on dominating the earth? ...

(Is this you, Vicdan, calm, considerate, always courteous? You can't recognize yourself, can you? How did you manage to conceal your rage until now? Who is the real target for your indignation – the British army, or Hugh? Who is it?)<sup>23</sup>

The narrator's parenthetical remark here alerts the reader to Vicdan's tendency to intellectualize all feelings and sexual urges and to deceive herself by denying that the source of her anger at Nefise lies in her own failed relationship with Hugh. Another parenthetical intrusion that is even more straightforward about ignoring bodily sensations concerns a later period when Vicdan has returned from Cambridge and married a Turkish school teacher from the Black Sea region named Raik. This time the narrator intrudes during a dancing scene at a party held at Vicdan's brother, Burhan's house:

He [Burhan] puts the record of 'La Cumparsita' on the gramophone. Now they have to dance. Raik and Vicdan dance gracefully and skillfully to the tango. (Vicdan, you are in the arms of the man you love, wipe from your mind all perverse thoughts, forget about your surroundings, just enjoy the present moment!)<sup>24</sup>

During the night following the party, Vicdan suddenly wakes up, and the narrator again takes the opportunity to address her critically: "That night Vicdan jerked suddenly awake. What woke you, Vicdan? Was it something to do with your body? The sexual energy your body didn't use up in the swift movements of the dance?"<sup>25</sup>

When the daughter/narrator does not intrude through parentheses, she conveys her disturbance by making her critical voice heard alongside Vicdan's, especially while narrating events through Vicdan's consciousness. Although lengthy, an excerpt worth analyzing in this regard concerns Vicdan's second trip to England. As an appropriate representative of the modern Turkish women of the young Republic, she has been asked by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk to give a talk on the BBC about the women's rights reforms implemented in Turkey. In this scene, in which she is sailing to England, Vicdan is in very high spirits, feeling that she is finally a legitimate member of the powerful world of men:

Nearly all the passengers were seasick, but Vicdan resisted as if she were made of steel! She is on deck in her thin raincoat, defying the cold wind that scours her face! The Gazi [Atatürk] has chosen her, has believed in her, treated her

with respect, entrusted her with a mission. ... Raik is in love with her; Burhan and Reha admire her, their sister, who has graduated from the great Cambridge University with honours, just like a man ... Vicdan smiles at the storm. The love her menfolk cherish for her enfolds her like a warm coat of fur, impenetrable by wind or rain. After the meeting with the Gazi, a whole new, liberating vista has opened before her: the world of men and the range of responses it arouses within her.

... The responsibilities on her shoulders, instead of wearing her down, make her soar higher and faster, as if flying with the wind. She is free of foreboding ... She has abandoned the old world of women and moved on. How suffocating it had been there! Her mother's domineering, all those sombre years of secondary and higher education in girls' schools and colleges! ... Vicdan has no intention of going back to that old world of women! She has not yet learnt that what she is abandoning is a sanctuary, somewhere to run to and take refuge in, when you are battered by other forms of life.

Vicdan is drunk with happiness ... If it were not for that sad image appearing like a question mark ... The pallor of Virginia Woolf ... The face of an emancipated and creative woman in a most liberal country ... But the Channel wind has blown Woolf's image away! ... Vicdan has reached Dover free from anguish ... She is once more in her beloved England! ... <sup>26</sup>

Although the narrator allows Vicdan's voice to dominate most of this excerpt, she makes sure that her critical voice is heard alongside where necessary. She is clearly upset by Vicdan's joyous celebration of having abandoned 'the old world of women' and her notion of emancipation, which involves a denial of womanhood to take part in the world of men. The narrator's disturbance is also felt when she equates Vicdan's state of happiness with drunkenness. In the excerpt, the unexpected appearance of the 'sad image' of Virginia Woolf is ambiguous and may be interpreted in a variety of ways, but within the context of this discussion it may again be read as an instance of the narrator's second thoughts. Virginia Woolf has a significant place in Vicdan's memories. Together with her friend Nefise, she has admiringly listened to her talk at a conference in Cambridge: 'Woolf talked about things they had not thought about before, speaking of insights they had not sensed through spine or brain before ... about time and womanhood, about the crushing weight of centuries that had rolled over the female sex.'<sup>27</sup> In her moment of bliss Vicdan quickly discards Woolf's sad image from her thoughts, but as the narrator seems to suggest, giving Woolf the necessary attention could lead her to reconsider her readiness to be accepted into the world of men at the expense of disregarding her womanhood. In fact, it is possible to regard Woolf's thought as a forerunner of later feminist discontents with woman's relationship with her body. As early as 1929 in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf emphasizes being true to one's womanhood, arguing that women should write 'as women write, not as men write'.<sup>28</sup> In a later essay, she addresses the issue even more directly: '[the problem of] telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet'.<sup>29</sup> Although an admirer of Virginia Woolf, Vicdan has not been able to understand this essential aspect of Woolf's thought.<sup>30</sup>

In the novel, the section describing Vicdan and her brothers happily climbing Mount Uludağ in northwestern Anatolia is another significant scene revealing the distance

between Vicdan and the narrator. This section, entitled 'At the Summit', opens with the narrator addressing and praising Mother Cybele, the mythological goddess of nature and fertility:

Mother Cybele, squatting on her heavy haunches and suckling, for thousands of years, the child ... pressed to her ample bosom! ... Mother Earth, symbol of endless life and of endless death. ... You set up home on the summit of Uludağ, our Anatolian Mount Olympus ... <sup>31</sup>

To the narrator, Cybele is a symbol of the powers residing in nature and the female body, and as a proud daughter she wishes to associate her mother with the goddess, describing her in similar terms:

Vicdan Hayreddin lay on the hot chalky stone, ... planting her hips firmly on the summit of Uludağ.

She surrendered her whole being to the delicious exhaustion flowing from her body into the stone, surrendering to the silence in which every cell of her anatomy was dissolving. Her brothers Reha and Burhan lay on either side of her, their heads resting on her breast, while it rose and fell to the accompaniment of her deep breaths. <sup>32</sup>

The narrator's attempt to represent Vicdan in natural and bodily terms echoing the qualities of the goddess is a failed one, however. Being in nature at the summit of the mountain makes Vicdan's brothers, Reha and Burhan, 'aware of their bodies, agile and strong. The images of women they have touched or dreamed of touching appear and vanish'. <sup>33</sup> But the same atmosphere creates no such effect on Vicdan. She, too, feels ecstatic, sharing this moment on the mountain with her beloved brothers, but her thoughts and feelings are far from being of a bodily nature. Even her fantasies at this moment of joy belong primarily to the realm of the mind: 'Fantasies take shape in her imagination, nourished by her skin's contact with her brothers'. The gazi Mustafa Kemal and Lieutenants Burhan and Reha Bey, are at dinner together, at ease, feasting at a table'. <sup>34</sup> The purely intellectual nature of this dream is also suggested by Vicdan's inability to imagine her fiancé, Raik, 'sitting at her fantasy table'. <sup>35</sup> No matter how hard the daughter/narrator tries, Vicdan remains a woman with a firm notion of the sharp boundary between the body and mind. The key to her self-definition is the ideal of adhering to the intellectual realm, which—to her and to many other women of her generation and thereafter—can only be achieved through disregarding the body.

### **Undermining Dichotomies and Embodiment through Writing**

Foregrounding the body while attempting to dissolve long-held notions of the mind-body dualism requires developing a writing style that specifically reflects woman's experience as both a mind and a body. Cixous and Irigaray have argued in this direction, emphasizing the significance of writing (through) the body while practicing it at the same time in their own writing. Trinh T. Minh-ha talks about womb writing, 'which neither separates the body from the mind nor sets the latter against the heart ... but allows each part of the body to become infused with consciousness'. <sup>36</sup> Women writers

employ a variety of strategies to undermine conventional styles that promote the binaries rooted in patriarchal thought. The rest of this essay will explore how Atasü's writing style works similarly, reinforcing the serious criticism of patriarchal notions of the body and related binaries already developed through characterization and distance in narration.

Underlying the mind–body dualism are other fundamental oppositions between subject and object and self and other. As Nancy Mairs states:

*I have* a body, you are likely to say if you talk about embodiment at all; you don't say, *I am* a body. A body is a separate entity possessable by the 'I'; the 'I' and the body aren't, as the copula would make them, grammatically indistinguishable.<sup>37</sup>

*The Other Side of the Mountain* goes about the project of undermining such binaries through its narrative inconsistency achieved by continual shifts in narrative perspective. The novel opens with the first-person narrator giving an account of her childhood and the inner conflicts she lived through as a young woman. Following the first few paragraphs, however, this first-person narrator addresses herself occasionally in the second person. Such shifts to a different, more critical narrative voice are signaled through the use of parentheses:

When was life reduced to a tedious trail through the unending steppe? I did not feel well ... though my body's loneliness was at an end.

(Like parched petals, your body wilted. Caresses that ignored all of your being, except for the flesh, injured it, burned it up, wiped it out.)

My needs and wants warred against each other. How I wish I had lived in Vienna during the Belle Époque, been one of Freud's patients, danced at the Opera Ball with a lieutenant of the Imperial Army and fallen in love with him. He would have been shot in battle, and I would have wept, wept, wept ...

(You refused to admit that you were buried up to your neck in the common fate of woman. You closed your eyes tight, saw neither mud nor marsh. You had to marry, had to become a faithful wife and mother, that is what you thought. You were scared to death of losing your innocence.)<sup>38</sup>

A strategy like this upsets traditional subject–object relations. By referring to herself as 'you', the narrator, who is normally the 'subject' in full control, puts herself in the position of an 'object' or an 'other'. At other instances in the novel, the same first-person narrator suddenly shifts to third person, this time being even more explicit about making an 'object' of herself by using the pronoun 'she' to give an account of her own feelings and experiences. Abrupt shifts like these do not allow a complacent reading in which all fundamental dichotomies are taken for granted. Instead, the reader is left highly confused about what to make of this kind of narration, which contributes significantly to dissolving the sharp boundaries between binaries. The autobiographical quality of the novel also reinforces this project of undermining oppositions. Reading through the novel, it is often hard to distinguish fully between the author herself and the first-person narrator, whose life story is very similar to the author's. Seemingly, the author as subject has created the narrator as object, but matters are again complicated through the

impossibility of drawing clear lines between the two.<sup>39</sup> All such aspects of the novel are like a demonstration of Irigaray's argument concerning woman's plurality. They are also formal supports for the first-person narrator's (and hence Atasü's) significant contention towards the end of the novel that 'the self is identical with the other,' that it is 'the basic code of the universe'.<sup>40</sup> Strategies like these, through which subject and object, self and other, are intermingled, also serve to undermine the mind-body dualism as a closely related patriarchal construct. The body, traditionally regarded as the 'object' or the 'other' which the mind can rule over, can no longer be perceived as an entirely separate entity. Mind and body become intertwined, dissolving the binary and all hierarchies associated with it.

*The Other Side of the Mountain* complements this move toward undermining the mind-body dualism through an 'embodied' writing style that attempts to give language a material presence, stripping it, as much as possible, of its abstract and symbolic quality. This is an important strategy serving to foreground corporeality and contributing to the feminist project of writing through the body. As Trinh T. Minh-ha quotes from Anaïs Nin in her discussion of writing the body, woman's writing 'must be a human creation, of flesh, it must be different from man's abstractions'.<sup>41</sup> Atasü's style in her work in general provides a good example for this kind of writing. In her review of Atasü's collection of short stories, *Uçu*, Sevda Çalışkan explains how 'Atasü works like an alchemist who turns gaseous substances back into hard matter with the concreteness of her images'.<sup>42</sup> A similar statement would also apply to *The Other Side of the Mountain*. Throughout the novel one can observe Atasü's insistence on concretizing abstractions through the use of solid, and at times bodily, imagery. The joy and relief Vicdan's daughter feels after reading through her mother's letters, for example, are described in bodily terms suggestive of labor and childbirth: 'When she finished reading the letter, tears were streaming down her face. ... A fierce pain seized her as a great sense of joy came to birth'.<sup>43</sup> Later in the novel, Vicdan's daughter thinks of her family and her past: 'I dip my hands into time, the past laps against my skin. Bygone days ... start to circulate through my body, touching the memories stored in the protein spirals within the honeycombs of my organisms, making them thrum'.<sup>44</sup> On another occasion, Raik, Vicdan's fiancé, thinks that '[d]ay tastes like a ripe peach on the palate. Time is suspended in the air and can be inhaled'.<sup>45</sup> On his deathbed, Vicdan's brother Burhan loses consciousness gradually:

The memory is ebbing—this is low tide—from conscious purpose, from what is accepted as reality to the primary state of matter; from the shores of the sea town, from the shrieks of seagulls, to the beginning, afloat in maternal waters.<sup>46</sup>

During a row concerning personal benefits gained through political means, Vicdan's mother, Fitnat Hanım, hurls 'her words savagely against her daughter's eardrums'.<sup>47</sup> In Atasü's novel, words indeed lose their symbolic quality and become concrete 'like hurled stones'.<sup>48</sup> In this respect, the novel's style comes close to demonstrating Judith Butler's contention that 'language and materiality are not opposed,'<sup>49</sup> but 'are fully embedded in each other'.<sup>50</sup> This constant attempt to materialize abstractions through concrete images contributes significantly to achieving embodiment through writing. It also helps to undermine yet another binary—abstract versus concrete—which has close associations with the mind-body dualism. Atasü's technique defies patriarchal logic, which posits that in order 'to become a subject,' one needs 'to reject materiality

in favour of transcendence'.<sup>51</sup> It suggests, instead, that the two terms of the binary are not so foreign to each other after all and points the way to Elizabeth Grosz's corporeal feminist project of achieving a new understanding of 'embodied subjectivity' or 'psychical corporeality'.<sup>52</sup>

The novel employs other strategies to transcend the abstract and symbolic quality of language. In her insightful article on Erendiz Atasü as a master of concretization,<sup>53</sup> Seveda Çalışkan first shows the way Atasü employs concrete images to give language a more material aspect. She then explains how the author takes this strategy further to literalize what initially looks like figurative language, making words touch upon reality in unexpected ways. Likening this technique to what Regina Barreca calls 'metaphor-into-narrative',<sup>54</sup> Çalışkan exemplifies the way it works in *The Other Side of the Mountain*: The section of the novel entitled 'At the Summit' describes a memorable time in the lives of Vicdan and her brothers when they are all 'at the summit' of emotions, as it were. The same scene, however, also takes place literally 'at the summit' of Mount Uludağ, which Vicdan and her brothers climb for the day. Vicdan's younger brother, Cumhur, returns from the Korean War a changed man who has lost his youthful optimism. But he has also changed physically, having lost a leg in Korea. Burhan, the elder brother, grows more distant from Atatürk as he grows older, questioning some of Atatürk's ideals concerning the Republic. But this distance also gains a literal dimension when Burhan gets a new birth certificate, changing his original place of birth from Salonika, which is also Atatürk's birthplace, to İzmir.<sup>55</sup>

Regina Barreca exemplifies 'metaphor-into-narrative' through a discussion of authors such as Muriel Spark and Fay Weldon, who are important representatives of 'women's comedic writing'.<sup>56</sup> Although Barreca does not mention it, a similar pattern of concretizing metaphors can also be observed in the work of women writers such as Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson, whose fiction is characterized by magical realism. Erendiz Atasü belongs to neither a comedic nor a magical realist tradition, and in this respect her effective use of this technique is unique and distinguishes her from both her western and Turkish counterparts. She shares, however, the same concern of undermining patriarchal notions of language with all other woman writers who successfully employ this strategy.

In *The Other Side of the Mountain* the strategy of literalizing language becomes even more noticeable as the novel draws to a close and the narrator returns to the first narrative level. The novel's final section opens with the narrator visiting the cemetery in Ankara:

They all lie here, my mother Vicdan, my father Raik, my uncles Burhan, Reha and Cumhur, my grandmother Fitnat Hanım. And Nefise ... They are all here. I think of the old cemetery in Trabzon that looks over the Black Sea from the heights, where my father's mother and his brothers have been sucked into the texture of the earth. And those uncles, who, at the beginning of the century, were whirled away and dispersed by the storm of war in the Caucassian mountains.<sup>57</sup>

In light of the above discussion, one should notice that some of the language here that would normally be taken figuratively is meant literally. The narrator is not using a euphemism while describing her dead relatives. She really means it when she says they 'have been sucked into the texture of the earth' and 'dispersed by the storm of war'. The preference for the concrete and literal in place of the symbolic and figurative is even stated

explicitly as the narrator continues to think about herself, her family members and humanity in general:

But then I turned my attention to the soil and realized that Neruda's verse was absolutely true—'The flesh of the earth is made up of people'. No, it is not a metaphor. The soil filling my hand, the physical texture of the very matter I feel on my palm, is made up of generations of people, living and dying.<sup>58</sup>

This kind of 'embodied' writing exposes the patriarchal understanding of language as symbolic while undermining binaries such as abstract and concrete and mind and body. As Çalışkan puts it, in *Atasü* the word becomes 'concrete and reproductive, just like woman's body'.<sup>59</sup>

### Conclusion

*The Other Side of the Mountain* represents the condition of the modern, emancipated Turkish woman with regard to issues concerning the body. Atasü's critical stance is carefully developed at the level of theme and character and conveyed to the reader through cleverly devised narratorial strategies and an 'embodied' writing style. The novel is also an apt example to demonstrate the resonance of western feminist discourses on the body in an originally non-western culture. It is as though the novel echoed the development of feminist theorizing about the body through its depiction of two generations of the modern woman of the Turkish Republic. It may, therefore, be said to juxtapose culturally specific concerns about woman's body and wider feminist perspectives on the issue. With its vivid and critical representation of the social and ideological picture of an important era in Turkish history, *The Other Side of the Mountain* will definitely occupy a significant place in the history of modern Turkish literature. As this essay has attempted to show, however, it is also a text that goes beyond this, making a worthwhile literary contribution to the wider project of corporeal feminism. In its attempt to foreground the problem of bodily alienation and to achieve embodiment through writing, the novel demonstrates—from both a local and a universal perspective—what it means to be a modern, intellectual and emancipated woman with an awareness of the dangers involved in disembodiment.

### Notes

1. Atasü, *Dağın Öteki Yüzü*; and Atasü, *The Other Side of the Mountain*. *Dağın Öteki Yüzü* was awarded Turkey's prestigious Orhan Kemal book award in 1996.
2. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 3–4.
3. Lloyd, *The Man of Reason*, 2.
4. Beauvoir, *Second Sex*, 267.
5. Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*.
6. Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 40.
7. Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, 7.
8. Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', 337.
9. *Ibid.*, 342.
10. Irigaray, 'This Sex Which is Not One', 353.
11. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 17–18.
12. *Ibid.*, 18.

13. Ibid., vii.
14. This does not mean that Turkish women today no longer face problems concerning their status as individuals or as members of the family or society. I say this to point to the considerable developments achieved in a society initially characterized by highly conservative and non-egalitarian notions concerning women.
15. Atasü, 'Çagdaş Türk Yazımına bir Bakış', 12; my translation.
16. Kayır, 'Kadın ve Cinsel Yaşamı', 32.
17. Onur, 'Psikolojiden Edebiyata, Kadın', 51.
18. Atasü does not name the institution in the novel, probably finding specific names unimportant. What appears more important is that Vicdan and others like her are among the first intellectuals of the young Republic.
19. Atasü, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 33–34.
20. Ibid., 194.
21. Ibid., 214.
22. Ibid., 208.
23. Ibid., 60.
24. Ibid., 179.
25. Ibid., 82. The absence of parentheses here is a typing error in the English edition of the novel. In its Turkish original, the narrator again addresses Vicdan in parentheses.
26. Ibid., 92–94.
27. Ibid., 71.
28. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 74–75.
29. Woolf, 'Professions for Women', 281.
30. It is worth noting that Virginia Woolf is a favorite writer of Erendiz Atasü herself. In her 'Letter to the Reader' at the end of the book, she remembers Woolf with 'respect, admiration and love' as the writer 'whose work has drawn me ever closer to the writer hidden within me'. *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 283.
31. Ibid., 83.
32. Ibid., 95.
33. Ibid., 86.
34. Ibid., 97.
35. Ibid., 97.
36. Minh-ha, 'Write Your Body AND The Body in Theory', 262.
37. Mairs, 'Carnal Acts', 298.
38. Atasü, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 12–13.
39. One should also note that the autobiographical elements of *The Other Side of the Mountain* are not disguised to be found out later by critics working on Atasü's novel. On the contrary, Atasü is keen on drawing the reader's attention to this quality of her work, which she does through her 'Letter to the Reader' at the end of the novel.
40. Atasü, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 259.
41. Minh-ha, 'Write Your Body AND The Body in Theory', 259.
42. Çalışkan, 'Uçu by Erendiz Atasü', 388.
43. Atasü, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 27.
44. Ibid., 272.
45. Ibid., 215.
46. Ibid., 182.
47. Ibid., 237.
48. Ibid.
49. Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 68.
50. Ibid., 69.
51. Brook, *Feminist Perspectives on the Body*, 15.
52. Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 22.
53. Çalışkan, 'Bir Somutlama Ustası', 34–38.
54. Barreca, 'Metaphor-into-Narrative', 243–256.
55. Çalışkan, 'Bir Somutlama Ustası', 37.
56. Barreca, 'Metaphor-into-Narrative', 243.
57. Atasü, *The Other Side of the Mountain*, 253.

58. Ibid., 258.  
 59. Çalıřkan, 'Bir Somutlama Ustası', 38; my translation.

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