



# The influence of motherhood in the construction of female identity: A subversive approach to motherhood in Erendiz Atasü's novels

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## Abstract

Within masculine ideology the concept of motherhood remains essential to female identity. That is why it is important to focus on the representations of motherhood in literature, where the most controversial discussions of feminism can be found. The issue of motherhood remains an unresolved issue today, with opposing arguments even within the feminist movement. This paper aims to analyse the issue of motherhood in the novels of Erendiz Atasü, who has acquired an undisputed place as a feminist writer in Turkish literature. She undermines the traditional concept of motherhood and uses it as a tool for deciphering and transforming masculine ideology.

## Keywords

Erendiz Atasü, female body, feminism, literature, motherhood, ideology

## Introduction

The organization of social life based on gender construction shapes power relations between the genders and assigns different social tasks to men and women. In this relationship motherhood plays a crucial part, but how it should be experienced continues to be a much-debated issue in the fields of science, national and international policies, culture, literature, moral and religious systems and the media, with many theories and suggestions that affect, nourish and contradict each other, mostly with women being silenced or ignored in the process. As Colleen Carpenter-Cullinan suggests, although there has been a wide range of debate on motherhood in both academic fields and popular culture, ‘The voices of mothers themselves are rarely heard in the cacophony of

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prescriptive and descriptive literature that presumes to define and analyse motherhood and mothers' (Cullinan, 2002: 77).

The most problematic aspect of motherhood is perhaps, as Lynda R. Ross (2016: 12) has pointed out, the assumption that women are born with a maternal instinct and have a desire and tendency to nurture others. The association of the female body with childbirth is so strong that a childless woman is seen culturally as a freak of nature, a failure (Gillespie, 2000), or an abnormal,

damaged woman – infertile, barren and childless. Even when a childless woman is envied her freedom, it is understood to be at the cost of the most intimate and crucial of human relationships. The childless woman is the other of the other, doubly lacking first as a woman (not man) and then as a non-mother (not fully woman). (Gandolfo, 2005: 113–14)

Carolyn Kendrick further suggests that 'any woman who chooses not to bear a child is [considered] a traitor to her very own femininity' (2003: 43). Claudia Malacrida and Tiffany Boulton argue that motherhood is a rite of passage for women from childhood to a selfless adulthood and that childless women are even perceived as 'selfish and lazy' (2012: 768). A widely accepted definition of ideal motherhood is provided by Joan Wolf through the concept of the 'total mother' who

is expected to devote all available (and even some unavailable) time and energy to protecting her child from *risk*. She controls her own diet and her child's diet, her own environment and her child's environment, her own daily itinerary and her child's daily itinerary, in order to avoid the numerous risks to perfect health and the numerous fallings-away from perfect (medically certified) safety that apparently beset her on all sides in modern society. (Muers, 2010: 9)

In other words, motherhood brings a sharing of the body with one's power over it. A woman's body is controlled not only by herself but also by the baby, who literally shares the female body for a while, and by the father who also claims ownership of the baby along with the female body (Powell-Jenkins, 2006: 79). The idealized concept of motherhood is all about suffering and self-sacrifice; the more a woman suffers, the more dignified she becomes (Malacrida and Boulton, 2012: 761). However, although women are expected to be self-sacrificing, caring and protective, ironically they are also criticized for being domineering and over-protective (Ross, 2016: 4). As Ross adds, modern Western communities idealize motherhood as a sacred duty, at the same time devaluing and trivializing the labour necessary for childcare (2016: 10). It is a kind of labour that occupies a woman's whole life and resources without a return of any kind. Fiona Joy Green argues that this standard of ideal motherhood is dictated by patriarchy and women who do not conform to this standard are punished with a

devaluation of the self, the shattering of self-esteem and self-confidence for the sake of self-sacrifice, an isolation from being unable to share the shame and the guilt of their non-conformity, depression and even deprivation of their children for being 'unfit' for mothering. (Green, 2004: 129)

One of the most important names to open the traditional perception of motherhood to debate is, without doubt, Simone de Beauvoir. While she does not totally reject it she

argues that motherhood is an unpleasant trap for women and criticizes the conditions of motherhood and the ideology that encourages and even compels all women to be mothers. As Yolanda Astarita Patterson suggests, Simone de Beauvoir never wanted to have children and never regretted it; Beauvoir adds that other feminists ought never to have children, a position that was considered to be unrealistic by Betty Friedan (Patterson, 1986: 90). Patterson goes on to argue that Beauvoir resisted the ideology of motherhood from her early childhood onwards, imagining that her dolls were her pupils rather than her children and that through her fiction she explores and illustrates the idea of resistance to the unconditional acceptance of motherhood (Patterson, 1986: 105). She simply considered the sanctity traditionally attributed to motherhood as false consciousness.

With the publication of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, the second half of 1970s and the 1980s witnessed a different approach to motherhood, which embraced the female body and attempted to show how the traditional concept of motherhood was a construct of patriarchal ideology. First of all, Rich refuses either to degrade or idealize womanhood or motherhood which are just different ways of creating a separate sphere for women through the acknowledgement of a 'woman's culture' or a myth of moral superiority in (1995: xxiv). She suggests that there are two forms of motherhood: potential (reproductive) motherhood and the institutional motherhood which 'aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control' (1995: 13). Unlike Beauvoir, Rich offers to embrace the potentiality of motherhood but rejects it as an institution which comes burdened by the myth of unconditional love and powerless responsibility (1995: 23). Rich argues that what harms women about motherhood is the patriarchal assumption that mothering is natural to women and that child-rearing is exclusively a female responsibility, but without the power to determine the conditions of mothering which are purity, affection, sacrifice and asexuality. According to Karin Voth Harman (2004: 153), this is epitomized by the lack of the father in the myth of Demeter and Persephone.

Feminist literature has been particularly effective in exploring the complexity of motherhood. It has questioned and unwrapped the traditional view of motherhood dominated by a controlling masculine ideology and has explored how it is actually experienced by women. From Humm's point of view, feminist literary criticism is vital, not only in the way it dismantles works of literature based on a masculine ideology, but also because it illustrates the political effects of analytical strategies and principles like feminist policy (2003). An analysis of the ideology of motherhood within feminist literature shows how the masculine construction of motherhood can be modified by way of a feminist consciousness.

In this context the novels of Erendiz Atasü, who has an undisputed place in women's literature in Turkey, question and transform the traditional view of motherhood. Her work is a surprisingly rare example, because while gender inequality is widely discussed in Turkey, when it comes to motherhood such discussions are very restricted, due to the fact that the concept or the ideal of motherhood is sacred and untouchable. What makes Atasü particularly important, therefore, is that she specifically focuses on motherhood as an institution and in so doing deciphers and transforms masculine ideology from a feminist point of view. Within this context we will examine two of her novels dealing with the relationships between mothers and their daughters: *Bir Yaş Dönümü Rüyası* (2002, A Climacteric Dream) and *Dün ve Ferda* (2013, Yesterday and Ferda). In them Atasü

illustrates untraditional or alternative models of motherhood and highlights the crucial influence of matrilineal relationships on a woman's identity.

## Erendiz Atasü's fiction and feminism

I am writing to understand and explain my sex and women, who are subordinated in life, without forgetting that I am a woman. Silenced for thousands of years, women need to recover their voices; what they need is not to repeat what they have been taught but to transfer their needs, suppressed feelings, ideas and restricted lives to the collective consciousness of humanity in their own words. In my view, this is exactly what women's literature is. To be able to discover and comprehend the types of patriarchy that cannot be noticed at first sight and to be able to make patriarchy, which has affected all cultures in the world, visible through texts . . . To try to question and transform patriarchy. To be able to do this within the grace of literature. (Atasü, 2001)<sup>1</sup>

Atasü writes about the experience of women who, simply because they are women, have had to survive in a society surrounded by masculine privilege, and have been subjected to discrimination, isolation and fragmentation. In her view, writing for women is a way of sealing the split between mind and body, thereby creating a unified whole. Atasü agrees with Adrienne Rich who suggests that the

fear and hatred of our bodies has often crippled our brains. Some of the most brilliant women of our time are still trying to think from somewhere outside their female bodies – hence they are still merely reproducing old forms of intellection. There is an inexorable connection between every aspect of a woman's being and every other; the scholar reading denies at her peril the blood on the tampon; the welfare mother accepts at her peril the derogation of her intelligence. These are issues of survival, because the woman scholar and the welfare mother are both engaged in fighting for the mere right to exist. Both are 'marginal' people in a system founded on the traditional family and its perpetuation. (Rich, 1995: 284–5)

Accordingly Atasü aims to unify the female body and mind through her fiction by liberating women from the romantic plots in which women exist only as passive subjects waiting to be loved by a man, and narrating women's experiences alongside issues such as the Korean War, the events of 1968, political turmoil in the 1970s and 1980s, and transformation and change in Turkey in the 1990s and 2000s. Elaborating different experiences of womanhood in her novels and meticulously handling each protagonist's relation to history, 'she fills the gaps in women's voices with the substantiality of literature' (İşçi, 2014: 10). The fact that she discusses institutionalized motherhood is especially crucial in terms of women's studies in Turkey. She manages to open this untouchable ideal to discussion and challenges it by a controversial and unconventional depiction of motherhood which does not accept predetermined social and cultural boundaries.

As opposed to the traditional perception of womanhood in Turkish culture, the women in her novels are strong, knowledgeable, rebellious and brave, and, as Ferda, the protagonist of *Dün ve Ferda*, states, they are aware of the fact that they 'cannot be free if they are not strong' (Atasü, 2013: 11). Ferda's claim to power is represented through her control over language and by her insistence on eating ice cream on the street and sticking out her tongue as far as possible in honour of her newly gained freedom and strength

(Atasü, 2013: 13). Together, Ferda and Feride (the protagonist of *Bir Yaş Dönümü Rüyası*) challenge predetermined patterns and impositions as they become aware of the historical process in which they are set. They experience their existence so naturally that their rebellion against masculine power is automatic; it is put into words as a natural part of their identity. Their objection does not seem makeshift or artificial. Nor does it surprise the reader. Atasü characterizes her women in such a way that even in their weakest moments, even when they experience moments of fragmentation, isolation or collapse, they become stronger and able to reassert themselves (Atasü, 2009: 151).

Atasü rejects male authority in her fiction and men exist as secondary characters in women's adventures or tragedies. They appear as lovers, husbands, fathers or friends, but they never overshadow women. Women in her novels come from egalitarian families. Men, however, come from patriarchal families in which male supremacy cannot be questioned in spite of men's higher education or their revolutionary stance. Faced by strong women who question, criticize, believe in themselves and do not submit to masculine authority, they become 'petrified'.

In her novels Atasü discusses the binaries of nature/culture and public/private, which are the sources of gender inequality. The sexist division of labour that has been deeply rooted in the public/private dichotomy compels women to define themselves in a male language and from a male perspective (Menteşe, 2014). In this way, obedience, silence and masculine approval are imposed as the determining features of female identity. Atasü turns this construction upside down. The women in her novels can easily adapt to change, turn a critical eye on their environment, and embrace their intellectual potential, breaking the patriarchal association of women with the body and emotions. However, men, who have been associated with culture and rational thought by masculine ideology are resistant to change. They are depicted as paralysed by patriarchal ideology and even though they are politically progressives or revolutionaries, their attitude to women remains unchanged. While women in the republican era have gone through a profound social shift and have broken from the traditional models of womanhood, men have been incapable of doing so and therefore of revising their traditional gender perceptions.

Atasü's women are mothers, but they do not define themselves only through the traditional concepts of motherhood or the domestic sphere. They participate instead as active subjects in historical and cultural production: they are part of the sociological, political and cultural changes in Turkey throughout their journey from youth to maturity. All the women in Atasü's texts are professionals and intellectuals, active women who have a determining role in life. They do not consent to the secondary roles imposed on them without questioning. They are individuals who never define themselves by their connections with the men in their lives and do not hesitate to leave men if necessary, like Feride in *Bir Yaş Dönümü Rüyası* and Ferda in *Dün ve Ferda*. Both are professional and intellectual women, the former a teacher, the latter a pharmacist. They have an impact on both their own lives and the lives of the people around them, and are capable of establishing new lives when they fail. They refuse to conform to the secondary roles that are imposed on them and they never seek confirmation from men in their decisions. Their existence in the public sphere is an inextricable part of their identity. In this way Atasü turns traditional gender roles upside down, empowering women and revealing the contradictions of patriarchal ideology.

## Women's consciousness, their bodies and their fertility

The superiority given to men by patriarchal sexual ethics has conceptually and practically turned woman's body into an object available for use and gaze, and sometimes for abuse. The dichotomy of mind and soul that divides human existence is in a way more violently felt in woman's existence; a woman, who internalizes patriarchal values, will consolidate the masochistic character attributed to her by many institutions including science. And this suppressed cruelty will go hand-in-hand with masochism . . . This is how a woman's estrangement from her own body has been completed. (Atasü 2009: 54)

The body is an important and problematic issue in Atasü's novels, in which the struggle to have a say about one's own body is a significant element and a key aspect of the identities of the female characters. In her novels the individual stories are socially and politically contextualized, but women's experiences focus not on the attainment of educational, professional or economic rights but on how women try to discover and express their bodily desires and experiences (Direnç, 2014: 90). Women want to claim their bodies and struggle to do so. This zone, which is forbidden to women by masculine ideology, appears to be a field of liberation and self-discovery. First of all Atasü's characters, like Ferda in *Dün ve Ferda*, claim their sexual liberty. Ferda embraces sex as an essential part of her humanity independent of patriarchal perception; she does not experience it as a form of hegemony or as a way of 'proving oneself to oneself' (Atasü, 2013: 56). In this way, the construction of femininity which serves to fulfil only the desires of men and ignores the female body is deciphered and transformed.

In both novels, women are not defined or categorized through their fertility and their ability to perform service-oriented household tasks. Marriage and childbirth are never their priority. They produce, work and render themselves valuable, productive and free through their insistent existence within the public sphere. They are aware how patriarchy functions and influences their lives through their bodily experiences and that the female body can be rediscovered by questioning all types of estrangement so that a woman can reconcile herself with her abandoned half and become a single entity. With the reclamation of the body, the female consciousness re-experiences the fragmentation caused by the language and the uninterrupted flow of patriarchal discourse that continue to shape the cultural environment. Only when women dare to confront this flow do they obtain the chance to create new opportunities for themselves and rewrite women's history.

In this sense it is hardly surprising that Atasü refers to uterus-related illnesses in her fiction. When sick, the uterus deprives men of pleasure and the submissiveness they demand; it suppresses female sexuality and imposes its existence on the consciousness. But contrary to what has traditionally been expected, fertility has not put women in a sacred position. In *Bir Yaş Dönümü Rüyası*, Feride gains an awareness of her body after a hysterectomy. As she starts to realize that she has lost her fertility, she also notices how many things have been controlling her sexuality. The more women are estranged from their bodies in a daily life that is filled with masculine expectations and the more they surrender their lives to self-sacrifice, the more their daily routine is consolidated as if it were their normal mode of existence. Atasü reveals the distance between the body and the mind through the question Feride asks the doctor after her surgery. The doctor and his all-male team find Feride's question about whether she will feel sexual pleasure after the

operation odd and immoral. A woman's attempt to link her body with pleasure and express her bodily desires so openly does not match up with the male construction of female identity. Furthermore, she is judged by the medics for 'misusing her body although she has never been a mother' (2002: 105). So powerful is masculine ideology that women have unquestioningly sacrificed their bodies and consciousness to fit into the predetermined models of femininity. Obviously a woman does not only need a room of her own but also a womb of her own.

By creating sick bodies, in particular a sick uterus, Atasü shows how the body becomes aware of itself. After the operation, Feride realizes that in her two marriages she has been doomed to incomplete love and sexuality. Ferhat loves her body, whereas Sedat loves her ideas (Atasü, 2002: 275). Her husbands see her either as a sexual object or as a mind devoid of sexuality. Atasü's women understand that they cannot liberate their consciousness if they surrender their bodies. Both Feride and Ferda transfer the awareness and empowerment they discover to the other women in their lives and/or to their daughters as a precious matrilineal heritage.

## Novels' mothers, mothers' novels

Atasü makes use of the myth of motherhood as she introduces the experiences of womanhood and knowledge hidden in and filtered through these experiences while referring to women's daily practices. Her female characters do not have an ordinary or traditional relationship with their mothers and/or daughters. Atasü uses their relationships as a space to share experiences fostering female identity. The mothers in her novels highlight the difference between reproductive motherhood and institutional motherhood, rejecting and subverting the latter.

In Atasü's novels, giving birth is not an inextricable part of women's identity. It is not coincidental that the novel *Bir Yaş Dönümü Rüyası* starts with the title 'adopted daughter'. There is no biological link between Feride and Şirin (since Şirin is adopted), and through their relationship Atasü shows us a mother-daughter relationship in which sharing, the transference of experience, of self-realization, honesty, transparency, courage, solidarity and reconciliation are all brought together.

It has been a year since Şirin's mother died. At some point she sidled up to Feride, Feride cuddled her. The child tried to embrace the woman's body with her thin arms, buried her head into her bosom and said she missed her mother. At that moment Feride experienced a transcendent moment. Later as she talked about this moment she was going to tell Şirin, 'It was as if a door opened from my heart towards my stomach and you filled in that void.' (Atasü 2002: 8)

The bond between Şirin and Feride is so tightly woven that Feride shares the wisdom and knowledge she has gleaned from her life and experiences with her daughter. The relationship between this mother and daughter is based not on making sacrifices but on knowing each other, enjoying each other's company and sharing life.

The physical touch between the two was important; it would not have been so overrated if Şirin had been born out of Feride's body. If the woman had breastfed her for months, maybe they

would have been tired of this physicality. But now, this touch had a special importance and autonomy. This birth proceeded in the opposite direction. Şirin was infiltrating Feride's existence and Feride felt as though she was being reborn. (Atasü 2002: 58)

It is not only Feride who knows Şirin's sexuality and passions. Şirin also knows Feride's experiences as a woman, her passions, loves, pains and attitude to sexuality. Şirin's 'affection was like medicine to Feride' (Atasü 2002: 259). Feride meets Kamuran, a friend of Şirin's. The fact that Feride is a literature expert captures Kamuran's attention and he brings his poems to her to see what she thinks. As a consequence of the political disturbances of the time, Kamuran is killed for being a dissident left-wing activist and Feride shares her love for Kamuran with Şirin. At this point Şirin's affection for Feride shows that caring works both ways in this mother-daughter relationship. Şirin tries to comfort her mother saying:

It will pass in time. You will meet someone who is more appropriate for you, if you want. 'He was appropriate', Feride's voice was as broken as a little girl's who has lost her beloved baby doll. Şirin embraced her mother and as if she was consoling a hurt child she said 'Mother, Kamuran is homosexual . . . You say you could not achieve satisfaction with your husbands, you say the piece of organism that is called a penis does not interest you, is it Kamuran's feminine attitude that attracts you?' (Atasü 2002: 260)

Such an exchange between the two is very unconventional. The bond between Feride and Şirin is stronger than the umbilical cord and it is woven of experiences and wisdom which nourish and enrich them both.

The author does not encumber her female characters with a full dedication to children. In *Dün ve Ferda*, Ferda has full control of her own life which does not revolve around childcare or self-sacrifice. Atasü aims to subvert the traditional labour division and in this way the patriarchal perception which requires women to internalize domestic roles is not consolidated. To be more specific, Ferda has two maternal figures in her life. The first one is her biological mother, who embodies traditional motherhood or institutional motherhood, as Adrienne Rich puts it. That is why Ferda has never been close to her biological mother and their relationship has always been problematic. The caring mother that Ferda's mother has been is suffocating rather than affectionate to Ferda. It is indicated several times in the novel that the way her mother cares about her is not something she appreciates. Rather than being nurturing, this kind of motherhood is depicted as imprisoning and 'there is no gratitude in her heart' towards her mother; rather, there is anger for trying to make her accept the same cultural norms that she had been trapped into (Atasü, 2013: 33).

Besides her own mother, another maternal figure in Ferda's life is her advisor at university, Hürriyet Berkman, a woman single by choice who refuses to conform to traditional hegemonic gender relationships. 'Hürriyet' means freedom in Turkish, and as her name indicates, Hürriyet chooses to remain free from male hegemony. However, while Hürriyet Berkman is far from being a traditional figure, and while she is the embodiment of the Beauvoirian educating mother, Ferda is at odds with her as a maternal figure as well. Hürriyet Berkman is characterized as the opposite of Ferda's own mother, but her attitude toward Ferda is equally 'possessive, suffocating' (Atasü, 2013: 35). '[Ferda]

started working at the university to feel free and experience freedom. But what did she find instead? A professor who always wanted to see her by her side, a second mother' (Atasü, 2013: 35). After Berkman was imprisoned for four months for political reasons she 'embraced [Ferda] with maternal feelings; fed her; cared for her as if she were a wounded bird' (Atasü, 2013: 68). However, Ferda develops the same Electra-complex feelings for Hürriyet Berkman as her intellectual mother, just as she did for her biological mother. The Electra-complex attitude becomes even more obvious when Ferda has an affair with the chair of the department, Kazım Beyazıt, an old professor and the rival and secret admirer of Hürriyet Berkman.

Through these two opposing maternal figures, Atasü examines different modes of motherhood, both equally toxic and disempowering to Ferda. That is why she can never open up to either of them. There is always the distance of authority between her and these maternal figures. Atasü argues that this is the basic reason why there has never been a real relationship between the generations of women, no communication, no sisterhood, and no transference of experience in its real sense. In the novel Atasü makes one of her characters comment on her own work: 'One of her favourite themes is the relationship between the mother and the daughter, the friendship between women' (Atasü, 2013: 118). Although Ferda could never develop such a sincere relationship with her mothers, after struggling with herself and with the impositions of traditional norms, trying to find her own way of mothering, she eventually manages to establish the ideal mother-daughter relationship which is based on the kind of comradeship that Atasü envisions.

Beside these two maternal figures, Atasü characterizes Ferda as another alternative maternal figure and one that represents the future ideal of motherhood. In that respect, it is no coincidence that her name is Ferda, which means 'the future' in Turkish and the title of the novel, *Dün ve Ferda* makes sense in that Atasü narrates the past and the imagined future of motherhood. However, it is not easy for Ferda to break free from the impositions of traditional or institutional motherhood. Most of the time, she finds herself 'worrying' about her daughter and each time she fights off this haunting feeling of 'anxiety' which comes with the status quo (Atasü, 2013: 29). Atasü also reveals through Ferda one of the most common phenomena concerning motherhood: maternal ambivalence. Although ambivalence towards the child is a normal psychological phase that each mother goes through, it is never spoken out loud, it is hushed up and judged, and women are literally forced to push these feelings aside. Ferda puts this into words: 'Of course she loved her child; but the rage of being constantly interrupted is mixed into this love; although she sincerely tries to keep this rage under control, this feeling of being interrupted goes way back in the past' (Atasü, 2013: 122). Among other things, Ferda is politically, intellectually and sexually interrupted, and driven into a deep depression by the birth of her child. Atasü is one of the very few to reveal this concealed or rather ignored aspect of motherhood; she does not romanticize motherhood but normalizes the ambivalent experience of mothering. These ambivalent feelings, together with the anxiety and the urge to condition and shape her daughter in accordance with her own expectations turned their relationship into an 'non-relationship' (Atasü, 2013: 130). However, eventually Ferda and her daughter Barış make peace with each other and a healthy and a sincere relationship is established between them, but this only becomes possible after the death of Ferda's husband, the sole male figure within this trio. 'Death wiped away all the conflicts and the traces of

the earlier conflicts. The mother and the daughter were treating each other with a meticulous courtesy' (Atasü, 2013: 188). Both an emotional and an intellectual bond is established between the mother and the daughter and this new mode of communication is marked by a mutual enrichment and sharing rather than judgement and psychological violence. Perhaps Atasü is implying that a healthy relationship between women is only possible with the elimination of the male hegemony. At the very end of the novel, Atasü reveals Ferda's own longing for such a mother through a dream. In her dream 'she was a little girl, snuggling up in her mother's arms, jumping up onto her lap. But which mother was this? She does not have her mother's face, this was a different face which did not look like anyone else that she knew' (Atasü, 2013: 214). Ferda has never seen this face of motherhood before because it did not exist up to that point in her life; it is the face of an ideal, fantasized mother which is embodied in Ferda, the future.

Atasü shares Chodorow's point about the importance of a mother in her daughter's identity formation and states that motherhood reproduces itself and is a role which is psychologically felt as a result of social processes and internalized later on rather than an innate instinct (Chodorow, 1978). Therefore, what a mother transfers to her daughter is important. In Atasü's novels motherhood is not represented as an identity but as a version of experience unique to women; how women prefer to experience motherhood is up to them. The legacy that the characters have inherited from their mothers is the need to have a job so that they can be independent and more visible in the public sphere rather than being confined to the private. This is why all the heroines of Atasü's novels are associated with the public sphere and, contrary to masculine discourse, they do not feel 'incomplete'.

## Conclusion

In both novels examined in this study, women confront and question their bodies, fertility and motherhood. The emphasis on the 'womb' has been dominated by masculine ideology, and shows how this affects women's consciousness in their reconstruction of the female identity. It is a significant revolt against masculine ideology, and the female characters in the novels all fight to claim their bodies as they come to realize the influence of masculine ideology on their lives through bodily experiences. As Kristeva suggests in 'Stabat mater', when Atasü writes about motherhood she rips off its ideological cover to show how it is actually experienced by women and in doing so she produces an epitome of *écriture féminine* (Kristeva, 1986). As highlighted by the Italian philosopher Aldo Gargani, the 'interrogative tone' that can also be observed in Atasü's fiction should be an inextricable feature of women's writing: 'the goal of women's writing is not to advance theses, create systems, or delineate objective definitions. On the contrary, its aim is to pose questions, interrogatives, and define areas of inquiry' (Consolati, 2014: 510). Thus, in Atasü's novels the female body is rediscovered by women through this interrogative tone. While motherhood is a choice, womanhood is a type of existence that cannot be reduced to motherhood. Motherhood reproduces itself and is a social construct which is internalized later on rather than being an innate instinct. Instead of the constructed myth of motherhood, Atasü offers 'mothering against motherhood', in O'Reilly's terms, empowering her mothers to challenge and overcome the reductionist ideology of patriarchy (2004: 159):

the central aim of empowered mothering is to confer to mothers the agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy denied to them in patriarchal motherhood . . . That is why the merge of the genre and tradition of matrifocal narratives is crucial: matrifocal narratives, in unmasking motherhood and redefining maternity, impart such empowering depictions of maternal agency. (Podnieks and O'Reilly, 2010, 17–18)

Atasü refutes the ideology of patriarchal motherhood and the myth of the selfless mother, and replaces it with the portrayal of the self-realizing mother. Through her writing she guides her reader on a journey showing how women can discover their history, life and especially their body. In opposition to masculine ideology, this journey continues to carry each reader to different spaces of life and liberty, full of enriching experiences and voices specific to women. As Adrienne Rich writes, what is broken in women's lives can be 'mended and rewoven by women's hands' (1995: 280). In this case it is through Atasü's words and her art.

## Note

1. All translations of Atasü's work are by the authors.

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