Villains in the Family: Monstrous Mothers-, Daughters- and Sisters-in-law

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The aim of this paper is to explore the representations of in-law women (mothers, daughters and sisters-in-law) as villains in Turkish novel in the early republican period.

In another study based on life story interviews (with 18 upper-class elder women from Istanbul) I have illustrated that Turkish women of early republican period (1923-1945) considered their relationships with their in-laws as contentious and full of conflict. The previous study has shown that a compatible and harmonious relationship may exist between in-law women; however the general experience of in-law relations almost always suggested negativity, conflict, contention and dispute. In other words, most of the interviewees portrayed their in-laws as “villains” of their life stories. The previous data also shows that being a “villain”, in this context, is often connected with the allocation of “power” between the women in the family.

Villainy is about power and morality. Stories are generally about a form of power that is at stake. And we read them because we wonder:

1. How far will the villain go on the morality continuum to have that power? In other words, storytelling is based on how people make moral decisions.

2. How will the protagonist fight back? Will she have vigour and strength to do it?

The villain, then, is much more than a character who opposes the hero or a deliberate scoundrel or criminal. The villain is the maker, the plotter of the story.

In our context, the main concern of the protagonist is not saving the world but having control over her own life and the household. However, the villain in question here has another
noteworthy peculiarity. She does not generally show an open antagonism. On the contrary she enters the life of the protagonist in disguise of a mother, a daughter or a sister. She is subtle in deceit and is janus faced.

1. **Power**

The concept of power and what I mean by it should be elucidated before analysing the representations of the villainous characters in the novels. Issues to do with power were mainly introduced to cultural theory by Michel Foucault. Borrowing from him, I suggest that the definition of power for this particular study should be as follows:

Power, “is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical relationship in a particular society” (1978, 93). Power is exercised upon the dominant as well as the dominated. In other words, “power may come from below; it is multidirectional, operating from the top down and also from the bottom up” (Foucault 1979; also see Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982, 185). The concept of “power” is seen as relational and unstable (1978; 1979; 1982). That is the way how “power” starts in the “micro” level and was negotiated in the relationships of in-law women, although many of the daughters-in-law (the interviewees) agreed that they were “oppressed” by their mothers-in-law. Thus, I was able to delineate that the most recurrent themes in the narratives of women were actually the “little places and things” where power was negotiated in the relationships of in-law women.

2. **“Power” in the Stories**

The recurring themes in the stories can be gathered under the general headings of “beauty”, “love”, “cultural capital” and “economic capital”. These themes demonstrate four different discourses (or social narratives) through which women construct their own identities. They are also the main themes on which harmonious or contentious relationships hang. Thus, a close analysis of these issues in the novels will reveal the nature of the relationships between
in-law women and demonstrate that all these themes are actually under the general heading of “power”.

3. The Novels

Analysis of three novels and three different types of villain will be presented here.

a) **MUALLA** (Mualla) by Muazzez Tahsin Berkand (1941)

A Monstrous Mother-in-law

Muazzez Tahsin Berkand was a very popular romance writer in her time. She generally deals with family matters in the context of a love affair. Mualla, the protagonist, marries Cevat (a wealthy, famous writer) through an arranged marriage. His mother and sisters lead a “Westernised” life very similar to the “salon” life of the nineteenth century European nobility. Mualla, on the other hand, is a well educated angel like girl from a poor family.

Among all my data, the theme of jealousy between mothers and daughters-in-law based on the younger women’s beauty appears markedly only in Berkand’s ([1941] 2002) novel *Mualla*. Mualla’s mother-in-law Naime “would like to remain young and beautiful forever” (p. 23) and is jealous of the beauty of her daughter-in-law. She “who had ruled like a queen in the company of Cevat’s guests until now, could now sense that her sun had faded and that all would bow in front of her young and beautiful daughter-in-law” (p. 175). Thus the power at stake in this novel is Naime’s place in society. She acquires it through his son and she believes that she will lose it if and when he gets married to a woman he loves.

That is why she starts fighting Mualla on their wedding day. The battle begins with a pretension of intimacy. She enters her daughter-in-law’s room saying: “I heard that your mother withdrew for some rest; I came instead.. child.” (p. 77) And her body language is in line with her words; she touches her hair affectionately as she speaks. Then she “poisons” her, disguised in a sincere, compassionate, “motherly” manner:
“…your husband will never return your love for him... Poor Müzeyyen [Cevat’s ex-wife] who adored Cevat suffered so much... My son is very authoritarian... he does not know anything about love and loyalty; he is even distant to me. In a nutshell, my son is an intelligent but heartless man.” (p. 79)

She continues: “His wife should leave him free, minding her own business; she should not ask for much and should not get in the way of his travels and fun.” She adds that his former marriage ended “because Müzeyyen did just the opposite.” (p. 79) Then she continues with the reasons of the prospective marriage. She implies that this marriage takes place for reasons other than love and that “he decided to get married because he needs a son, an heir and a mother to his daughter [from previous marriage].” (p. 79) Another reason, she says, is that he is looking for an inspiration for his next novel and that he has picked Mualla as she will make a good character as a young, inexperienced country girl. She adds: “If you want this marriage to last, you should control your feelings and should not fall for him. She hates emotional women.” And she ends her words by saying that “if he will not give his heart to you, you should not love him, either”. (p. 82)

Mualla, considers the possibility of Naime’s untruthfulness but she thinks that “This smart, noble woman could not be as villainous and evil as to say all these vile things about her own son.” Thus she concludes that her future mother-in-law must be “right”.

Naime’s deceit gives shape to the main plot of the story. Believing that Cevat is incapable of love, Mualla acts defensive. She gets cold feet on the first day of their marriage and tells her husband that she regrets her decision to marry him. She asks for an annulment; he refuses. However, this offends him as he has already fallen in love with Mualla. His wounded pride puts off any attempt of sexual intimacy and he goes away on a long journey just to keep away from his wife.

On his return to the country, when Naime realizes that her son is under the spell of her daughter-in-law’s beauty, she goes to visit them in their country estate during a hunting party.
She decides to encounter “the woman whom she considers her “enemy”...” once again. (p. 176)

She takes a young and beautiful divorcee, Nimet, with her and cooperates with another one, Belkis, who has been in love with Cevat for all her life. Her plan is to separate the couple making her daughter-in-law jealous. She sends Nimet after Cevat whenever he is alone and makes sure that Mualla learns about her husband’s company. Soon, Cevat and Mualla become aware of her arrangements and they start fighting against her evil plans and verbal attacks together.

The final battle is won at a ball when Naime finally witnesses “the victory of her daughter-in-law with a burning rage in her heart. Mualla has finished her sovereignty and degraded her to a ‘nothing’ as she had feared” (p. 203) because “she had one of the jewels that is more valuable than the rest … Cevat’s love” (p. 203) For Berkand, then, “victory” in love causes the renegotiation of power which goes from the will of man to the will of the either woman. The woman who has Cevat’s heart seems to hold absolute power in a patriarchal family household.

b) **YAPRAK DÖKÜMÜ** *(Falling Leaves)* by Reşat Nuri Güntekin (1930)

Daughter-in-law: a symbol of decadence

This novel is a critique of the society of the period. It is about a household into which a new bride enters by getting married to the only son, Şevket, who is also the main bread-earner of the family. The falling leaves of the title is a metaphor for the children who leave the household one by one as a result of the devastating effects of social change. The relationships between the daughter-in-law, the four sisters and the mother-in-law can be analysed. The daughter-in-law, Ferhunde, symbolises the new Westernised mentality of the time and she causes the fall of the family.
As a matter of fact this newcomer is unwanted from the beginning, since she was involved in an affair with Şevket while she was married to someone else. The members of the family do not welcome this immoral woman except for the two young girls Leyla and Necla. They “wanted Şevket to marry her. Whatever she was, she would bring some renewal and fun to the family. And Şevket, who was as old-fashioned as their father, would change under the influence of his wife” (p. 55).

Thus, the harmony in the house is shattered at the prospect of this dubious member. Her presentation to the family manifests itself as a clash of traditions and “modern” life in the family story. This contradiction arising from her cultural capital is fought through Şevket’s love and insistence on her remaining. After long consideration and disputes, Ferhunde is allowed to enter the family story. However, Ali Rıza, the father:

…was expecting a shy, modest woman who would feel indebted with tears of joy because of being accepted into an honourable family. On the contrary, he was introduced to a woman who was bold, light, spoilt and who took everything for granted (p. 61).

This is how the author introduces us to the villain who will destroy the family.

Before long, Ferhunde becomes the “power” in the house and says: “There is a smell of the tomb in this house and I think we need a change of air by opening up the windows and the doors” (p. 62); she opens up the house to the influences of the people who have the same cultural capital as hers. The young girls of the house are deceived by her sisterly manners and cooperate with her because they think she is “modern” and the representative of the new way of life in the Republic. The family gets corrupted in a series of parties and dances given at the house. The people who visit the house are:

… various types of tramp who talked in an unmannerly way about gambling, women, trading manoeuvres or the money they would inherit … the swollen faces of addicts and drunkards … the older layabouts who have penetrated family homes just to take advantage of naïve girls … (p. 77)
These people frequent the house, affecting the younger daughters. As a result the narrative of the family starts changing from a good and honourable one to a modern but corrupt family.

Fikret, the virtuous daughter, leaves the house to get married to an honourable but older man as she cannot stand this new way of life. Şevket, for his part, works very hard and in the end has to embezzle from his company in order to provide money for this kind of life and the “needs” of his wife. Ferhunde, on the other hand, does not put the blame on their way of life but feels that the rest of the family are a burden on their shoulders. Whenever there is a contention over money between her and her sisters-in-law, she shouts wildly: “How can I live among these beggars? They both feed themselves with my husband’s bread and defy me at the same time. If you didn’t live here, we would be quite rich.” (p. 91).

Finally Şevket is put into prison and Ferhunde leaves the house. Ali Rıza, “knew from the very beginning that all the deterioration and malice were because of Ferhunde, the daughter-in-law. If she had not been there, his home would not have been like this, his children would not have been so corrupted. She was the whole reason why Şevket had became a thief and gone to prison” (p. 101) In prison, Şevket accepts that he was unable to act because of his love and admits to his father: “Getting rid of this woman would be a great happiness for all of us” (p. 103). Although the family seems to be all together again, it is obvious that Şevket’s career will never be the same and Leyla becomes the mistress of a rich lawyer through the influence of the “corrupt” friends whom she acquired because of Ferhunde. Fikret writes to her father: “Our family is talked of very badly here … I am disdained and dishonoured by my husband” (p. 92).

Ferhunde is the bad seed; a calculating villain whose immorality causes the downfall of her family. Her mother-in-law does not have the strength to fight her; Fikret finds a way to escape and Leyla and Necla cooperate with her. Her lack of morality, on the other hand, is
presented as a result of the western way of living. Thus, Ferhunde’s villainy is bigger than life and her lack of morality represents what is at stake in the Turkish society.

c) **KISKANMAK** (To be Jealous) by Nahid Sırrı Örik (1937)

_Sister-in-law: a psycho_

The story is about a family which consists of a husband, Halit (handsome, late 40’s), wife, Mükerrerem (young and beautiful) and the husband’s sister, Seniha (39 years old ugly spinster). The protagonist of the story, Seniha, is an anti-hero. The characters in the novel are all negative and immoral but somehow acceptable given their psychological depths.

Seniha and Halit have been sharing a house even before Halit marries Mükerrerem. Thus, Seniha have been the “mistress of the house”. It is seen that the common sense forewarns Mükerrerem about this issue. When Halit proposes Mükerrerem, the response of Mükerrerem’s friends and neighbours are very significant, as it reflects the bias and the presumptions of the society. Their comments are negative, telling Mükerrerem: “That woman will turn your life into a hell. One görümce is like three mothers-in-law; especially, a görümce who is used to be the mistress of the house all alone. God, help you sweetheart!” (Örik [1946] 1994, 84). Thus we are informed that the power at stake in this story will again be about the dominancy in the house. How will the power in the house be allocated? Who will be the decision maker about housework, socialising, child care and distribution of the economic resources?

Seniha constructs her whole identity on the basis of her ugliness, and this becomes the main motive behind everything she does and the way she develops; and her interpretation of her story shapes her future. Seniha “... had understood at a very early age that ugly people are doomed to be sacrificed for the beautiful and that they are not loved” (p. 61). In a society where men are already powerful because of their manhood, Seniha lacks the only attribute of
importance to a girl. Her jealousy becomes a neurosis when Mükerrerem marries into the family. Seniha decides to ruin this couple.

**Once she gets married into the family Mükerrerem thinks that the neighbours are proven to be wrong and that she has a perfect relationship with Seniha. Mükerrerem calls her “abla” (elder blood-sister) and Seniha never gives her a reason to feel the other way. She pretends to treat her as a sister. However, as a matter of fact she feels like a “housekeeper” or “a miserable beggar at their door”, resenting every nice thing the couple tries to do for her. She takes offense even when she is offered a present.**

The family first live in Ankara but two years later they move to Zonguldak because of Halit’s work. There, Mükerrerem meets a handsome young man, Nüzhet, and falls in love with him. Seniha is aware of her inclination from the beginning, but does not do anything to prevent it. On the contrary, she -very calculatingly- pushes Mükerrerem into Nüzhet’s arms. For example she “secretly helps the couple so that Nüzhet spends time with Mükerrerem all alone...” (p. 99) and that “Mükerrerem does not have to come up with lies” (p. 100)

Before her surrender, Mükerrerem fights her own self to stop loving Nüzhet. At some point she becomes very desperate and she seeks for Seniha’s assistance. She approaches her hesitantly and say: “Sister, I will confide you with a very important issue. I need your guidance and protection. I will do as you bid...” (p. 121). However, Seniha despises her total submission and because

“She would not be able to say ‘go on.. Betray my brother, no need for hesitation’ to a woman who is seeking her guidance and because she did not want to advise the opposite either, she tells her with a sweet but authoritarian voice: ‘Do not tell me anything. You know I love you so much. I would consider your sorrow mine. But I do not have the right to know the source of this sorrow.” (p. 122)

When the affair begins, “Seniha could not let any other person be the bringer of his destruction” (p. 144) and she reveals the truth to her brother herself. Halit makes his mind up
to confront Nüzhet and Seniha decides cold-bloodedly that “it is better for Halit to murder Nüzhet rather than be murdered by him. He would be more unhappy and suffer more if he became a murderer” (p. 152). And on the morning his brother kills Nüzhet, Seniha “looks younger and much more beautiful.” (p. 170). Moreover, “her situation in the house changes, she becomes the mistress instead of Mükerrem”.

Seniha is represented as sneaky, untrustworthy, self-pitying, vengeful and deceitful. Her jealousy makes her delusional and destructive. While she pretends to be a loving, thoughtful sister, she makes vicious plans behind the backs of her brother and sister-in-law. She has no morality at all and is the most cold-blooded, cruel in-law in my data.

4. **Concluding Remarks**

Villainy is about power and morality. As seen above, beauty, love, cultural and economic capital seemed to be the sites of power to be fought for the dominance in the household. “Body/Beauty” seemed to be of the greatest significance in the constructions of women’s identities. Beauty and love are always hand in hand. Love rendered women powerful, because the power which women wield was actually authorised by men.

Cultural capital refers in this work to the education, etiquette, manners, beliefs, customs, daily practices and rituals of a person or family. As seen in the novels and the interviews, differences between the cultural capitals of the in-laws became sites of power.

Capital of the economic kind is another recurrent issue. The person who holds the economic capital may be the head of the family even if she is a daughter-in-law. The data revealed that a member of a family with greater economic capital was preferred over the others and it was still easier for him/her to enter a new family.

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