



Section 4. History of literature

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GENDER RELATIONS IN 20TH - CENTURY FRENCH AND AZERBAIJANI PROSE

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Abstract

This comparative analysis explores the evolving representation of gender dynamics within 20th-century French and Azerbaijani literature. It examines how prose writers in both cultures navigated the shifting socio-political landscapes of the era – ranging from the impact of modernization and secularization to the influence of evolving ideological frameworks. The study highlights how French literature frequently emphasized existential perspectives and evolving domestic roles, while Azerbaijani prose traced the transition from traditional patriarchal structures to the integration of women into the public and professional spheres. Ultimately, the article underscores the distinct, yet parallel, ways in which these literary traditions interrogated identity, agency, and the cultural negotiation of gender throughout a century of profound transformation.

Keywords: *Gender, Gender relation, Azerbaijani literature, French Literature, literary identity*

1.1. Gender relations in French prose: individual freedom, equality and identity

20th-century French prose began to approach gender relations not only as social relations, but also as a fundamental indicator of human existence, individual freedom and identity. In the literature of this period, the relationship between women and men began to be presented beyond the framework of stereotypes and in connection with the in-

ner world of the individual, social constraints and the search for freedom. Annie Ernaux's work – *La Place* (1983) simultaneously questions gender and class identity through the relationship between father and daughter. The writer defines not only herself within the family, but also her relationship with society through language, education and writing:

“Je me suis mise à écrire sur mon père comme pour m'éloigner de lui et de moi-même. Il ne parlait pas comme

il fallait, il disait des choses qu'on ne dit pas.

"I began to write about my father, as if to distance myself from him and from that state of mine. He did not speak as one should, he would say things that one should not say." (La Place, Gallimard, 1983, p. 17)

In this passage, Ernaux expresses his critical attitude towards the patriarchal world through the figure of the father. At the same time, the manner of speech and the norms of behavior that society expects of women show how the gender structure influences language.

Annie Ernaux – *Une femme* (1987) In this work, Ernaux reveals the invisible suffering, labor, and silent sacrifice of women within society by telling the story of her mother's life:

"Elle a toujours été en mouvement, en action. Elle n'était pas sentimentale. Elle était courageuse, travailleuse, fière de son ménage."

"She was always on the move, in action. She was not sentimental. She was a woman who was courageous, hardworking and proud of her home." (*Une femme*, Gallimard, 1987, p. 34)

Here, the image of woman is presented not as a passive emotional being, but as the bearer of family and daily life. Ernaux transforms her writing into a visible representation of the invisible experience of woman. Marguerite Duras – *L'Amant* (1984) In Duras's *L'Amant*, the image of woman is drawn to the center of desire, of the conflict between body and identity. Here, love and sexuality are the main spaces in which woman defines her existence:

"Il me semble que je suis née avec lui, qu'avant je n'étais pas."

"It is as if I was born with him, I did not exist before him." (*L'Amant*, Les Éditions de Minuit, 1984, p. 16).

Although this expression shows that a woman finds her identity in her relationship with a man, it also indicates that patriarchal society limits a woman's existence to love and relationships.

In this work, Duras also reclaims the right of a woman to express her sexual desires. The image of a woman conveyed is at once traumatic, liberated, and socially unacceptable.

"Je suis une enfant, je suis une enfant dans ses bras, dans ses bras d'homme."

"I am a child, a child in his – a man's – arms." (*L'Amant*, p. 20).

These sentences present the desire of a woman, her age-related dual identity, and her taboo relationships in an artistic framework that is simultaneously aesthetic and socially disturbing.

In conclusion:

Both writers present the female experience not only as a sentimental and aesthetic category, but also as a builder of social identity, language, and memory. Ernaux's construction of female identity through social class and language, and Duras's image of woman within the framework of body, love, and taboo, show that in 20th-century French prose, woman has become not just an "other," but a "self-expressing" subject.

1.2. Relations between men and women in Azerbaijani prose: family, society, modernization

In Azerbaijani prose of the 20th century, relations between men and women are presented against the background of profound social, cultural and ideological changes. The family model, gender roles in society and modernization processes are the main factors influencing the presentation of these relations. Although the role of women in society expanded under the influence of Soviet modernism and enlightenment, this transition was reflected in literature in both conflicting and symbolic images.

Anar – "White Port" (1974) In Anar's story "White Port", relations between men and women within the family are built on psychological tension, misunderstanding and silence. In the work, the male character (captain) is the traditional head of the family, while the woman is the emotional and waiting party. However, silent conflicts lie behind these relations:

"Qadın dayandı, arxasını çevirdi. Kişi onun arxasınca baxdı. Baxdı və bir şey demədi."

"The woman stopped, turned her back. The man looked after her. She looked and said nothing." ("White Port", p. 67).

In this scene, the physical and emotional distance between man and woman is shown

through silence. The woman already expresses her existence in “wordlessness”. Here, the image of a woman is not only a being who waits, but also a being who changes her attitude with her inner decision.

Elchin – “The Head” and other stories In Elchin’s works, the relationship between men and women is often depicted against the background of psychological shocks brought about by modernization. The woman is no longer just the moral support of the family, but also becomes a person who is drawn to the center of a social dilemma, questioning herself and her freedom:

“Qadın kişinin dediklərini başa düşürdü, amma bu başa düşmək ona qərribə ağrı verirdi.”

“The woman understood what the man said, but this understanding caused her strange pain.” (Elchin, “The Head” story, p. 89)

This idea shows that female subjectivity is not only formed by reason, but also by feeling and pain. Elchin presents the female world not only on a rational, but also on a philosophical level related to emotion. Ekrem Aylisli – “Moonlight of the Kur River” In Aylisli’s works, the image of a woman is presented as a symbol of folk thinking, memory, and village life. His female images combine both classical and modern approaches. For example, the image of Zeynab is distinguished not only by her beauty and devotion, but also by her emotional weight:

“Zeynəb hələ də Kürə baxırdı. Elə bil həmin axar su onun nə düşündüyünü, nə çəkdiyini bilirdi.”

“Zeynab was still looking at the Kur. As if that flowing water knew what she was thinking, what she was suffering from.” (A. Aylisli, “Moonlight of the Kur River”, p. 42)

Here, the woman is presented as a being who is one with nature and feeling. Her silence and gaze become a means of internal turmoil and self-expression. Mir Jalal – “The Manifesto of a Young Man” (1938) In Mir Jalal’s “The Manifesto of a Young Man”, the woman – Sona – is presented as a bearer of enlightened ideas. She is an image of a woman who is not inferior to men on an intellectual level, who expresses her own opinion, and who seeks equality:

“Sona mənimlə mübahisə edirdi. Onun sözlərində mühakimə vardı. Bu məni heyrləndirirdi.”

“Sona was arguing with me. There was judgment in her words. This amazed me.” (Mir Jalal, “The Manifesto of a Young Man”, p. 118).

Here, the woman has already become a subject who judges, defends her opinion, and demands equality. This image symbolizes the new face of women in Azerbaijani literature in the first half of the 20th century.

In Afet Gurbanova’s stories, the image of a woman is presented as a silent being who cannot express her emotional needs within the family, living with deep psychological conflicts.

“O, hər dəfə pəncərədən baxanda, sanki öz həyatına kənardan baxırdı. Bir dəfə də olsun ‘nə istəyirəm?’ sualını verməmişdi.”

“Every time she looked out the window, it was as if she was looking at her life from the outside. She never once asked the question ‘what do I want?’” (“The Red Scarf” story, p. 31).

This idea shows that a woman lives a life shaped by the expectations of society, far from her own desires and individual desires. The writer also makes the passivity of her female protagonist feel the guilt of society.

Saadat Tahirli – In her work “Silent Howl”, she presents her female protagonists as individuals who feel, think and sometimes reach a breaking point. In her prose, the woman faces not only the problem of family, but also of adapting to the modern world.

“O susurdu, amma içində qışqırırdı. Hər kəsin eşitdiyi səssizlik, əslində onun ən böyük səsiydi.”

“She was silent, but inside she was screaming. The silence that everyone heard was actually her loudest voice” (“Silent Howl”, p. 47).

This sentence poetically reflects the woman’s inner breakdown and the society’s neglect of her. Gender relations are presented here as psychological and social entities, leaving the framework of the family.

Mehriban Vazir – “Girls of the Sun” Mehriban Vazir presents female characters as active subjects – they are not silent, they stand up, they defend their dreams and their right to live. Her heroines refuse to submit to the patriarchal system.

“Mən sadəcə ana yox, qadınam. Hər şeyə tab gətirən deyil, sevilmək, anlaşımaq istəyən bir varlıq.”

“I am not just a mother, I am a woman. Not one who can withstand everything, but a being who wants to be loved and understood” (“Girls of the Sun”, p. 83).

This sentence shows that a woman accepts her multidimensional identity and no longer wants to be confined to her selfless role.

Starting from the middle of the 20th century, Azerbaijani women writers have brought a new perspective to literature – a female perspective. In their works, women no longer speak “through the eyes of the other”, but with their own voice, feelings and position. They develop the image of women in Azerbaijani prose in a deeper and more multifac-

eted way, bringing a critical, but at the same time emotional and philosophical approach to the position of women in the framework of family, love and society.

In conclusion:

In Azerbaijani prose, the relationship between men and women has gradually moved beyond the family sphere and into more complex social and psychological spheres. The image of a woman is no longer simply an object of love or a support for the family, but is also presented as a being who builds an identity through her own freedom, emotions, and choices. Literature reflects these changes not only through art, but also as a powerful ideological tool that questions the gender structure of society.

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