



The madness of 'The Murderess'

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Abstract

This paper discusses Alexandros Papadiamantis' (1851-1911) novel 'The Murderess' and analyses the protagonist's (Hadoula or Frankojannou) psychological state and the reasons behind her actions to murder girls. Papadiamantis' protagonist does not compromise on her role in society and the 'superiority' of men in a man-made world, but, beyond the obvious, she is not a typical old woman. Reading through the book from the perspective of the medical humanities shows that Hadoula suffers from mental health problems, which make her see the murders she commits as a reasonable reaction to protect girls from the injustices of a patriarchal society. Papadiamantis gives the portrait of a 'serial killer', who has almost convinced herself that these murders constitute an ethical action. Although a fictional account, the book allows one a glimpse into mental illness from the perspective of the person who is ill.

Keywords: Ethics; Hallucinations; Insomnia; Literature; Medical humanities; Mental illness; Modern Greek Literature; Papadiamantis; 'The Murderess'

Introduction

'The Murderess' (1903) is one of Alexandros Papadiamantis' best-known works and a masterpiece of world literature. The novel revolves around an old woman's obsessions and preoccupations and can be seen as an analysis of her inner thoughts and world.[1] Hadoula is the murderess in Papadiamantis' novel, and the way she interprets her murders alludes to a person who is unable to see the real

consequences of her actions. In Hadoula's mind, girls only cause trouble to their families and she considers their deaths as some sort of 'salvation'. By murdering girls, she believes that she restores order and saves the girls from growing up in a biased, man-made society.[2] Above all, she believes that she saves their families from the burden of dowry.

Hadoula invents and applies her own moral code especially for girls from a deprived background. In actual fact, the

reader is exposed to a 'serial killer' who does not see murder and death in their real dimensions. She thinks her actions will make the families happier and 'free' the girls from giving birth (when they become women) to other girls; from that perspective her murders are seen by her as acts of prevention.[3]

From the beginning of his literary career, Papdiamantis had been interested in the representation of his characters' psychological condition and he was one of those authors who introduced and experimented with psychological and social themes.[2] In Hadoula, Papdiamantis paints vividly the profile of a woman who is mentally unwell. Of course, his description of Hadoula does not have the validity of a medical diagnosis, but can be seen as a literary representation of a mad person.

This article - without attempting to give any diagnosis - discusses how Papdiamantis draws the portrait of a woman who struggles with some sort of mental illness. The discussion is augmented by quotations from the English translation of the book.[1]

The Murders

The first victim of Hadoula is her granddaughter. Papdiamantis presents Hadoula's inner thoughts in a way that directs the reader towards her mental condition:

Frankojannou's [Hadoula's] brain really had begun to smoke. She had gone out of her mind in the end. It was the consequence of her proceeding to high matters. She leant over the cradle. She pushed two long, tough fingers into the baby's mouth to shut it up.

She knew it was not all that usual for very small children to shut up. But she was now out of her mind. She did not know very clearly what she was doing, nor did she admit to herself what she wanted to do.

From Papdiamantis' description above, it is clear that Hadoula has lost her sanity, and this is why she has committed her first murder. Her other murders later in the story are shown from that angle too.

Her daughter, Delcharo, mother of the dead infant, appears suspicious of her mother after she sees the bruises on the baby:

Even if she noticed certain black marks round the little child's throat, the baby's mother would never have dared to speak about them, nor would anyone have believed the charge against her own mother. Obviously the child had died of fever.

She does not, however, accuse her mother, for even if she had noticed Hadoula's madness and saw it as a possible threat, Delcharo did not expect she would be believed by others about the murder.

After she commits her first murder, Hadoula goes to the chapel to pray to Saint John:

Then, turning over in her mind the idea which had obsessed her but which she had never voiced aloud, she spoke in a voice that could have been heard, had there been any witness of that scene: 'If I was right, dear Saint John, send me a sign today, and I'll do a good deed, a Christian good deed, for my soul to be at peace and my poor heart'.

She prays not for forgiveness, as one might expect, but for a sign to show her if she did well.

One cannot surely say whether she was filled with remorse or not, but Hadoula was certainly obsessed with murdering young girls and with the righteousness of her actions. In fact, later, when she sees the two daughters of Perivolou playing 'on the constructed bank at the lip of

the cistern', she sees it as the sign she was waiting for from Saint John:

There, Saint John has sent me a sign, said Frankojannou to herself almost involuntarily, as she saw the two girls. What a relief for poor Perivolou, if they fell in the cistern and went swimming! Now let's see, is there any water in it?

The reader can rightly assume that Hadoula has found her next victims. In her madness, she takes the sighting as a sign that God approves her plan to murder, and she goes ahead with it as shown in the following lines:

And grabbing the two little girls in her two hands she gave them a powerful push.

This misinterpretation of coincidental events as signs from God recurs in the story, when Hadoula sees Xenoula, another girl, bent over a well and she thinks:

Eh, my Gott, an' if you fell in, Xenoula. What a relief it would be to your mother!

And when the girl does fall into the well, Hadoula's thoughts betray her obsession again:

A strange thought came into her mind. She had just uttered the prayer, more or less as a joke, that the child should fall into the well, and look it happened! So God (did she dare to think?) had heard her prayer, and there was no need to move her hands any more, enough for her to pray, and her prayer was answered.

Hadoula justifies the event as a 'divine intervention' but also takes it as a verification of the legitimacy of her actions. However, the strange thought that Papdiamantis mentions above is only strange for the reader who is a bystander in the events. For Hadoula, there is nothing strange about it, as the deaths are connected to her ethical

mission to save the girls and their families.

Her reaction after the death of Xenoula shows a psychopathological satisfaction:

Frankojannou had briefly forgotten her first idea, that God had willed for the prayer to be heard and the child to be drowned. Now the thought came back to her and unintentionally she laughed a bitter laugh.

As this is not the natural reaction to the accidental death of a young person, it can be said that Hadoula's sanity is doubtful and she is well on the way to becoming a Medea-like serial killer.[4] Ironically, even though she is not directly responsible for this death, it becomes the reason why people become suspicious of her and it ends in her dramatic persecution.

When she decides to hide in the mountains in order to avoid imprisonment, Hadoula explains to her daughter, Delcharo:

At the last echo of 'meet again', she added to herself unwillingly and with bitter irony, 'Either I shall meet you here or I'll go and meet your brother in prison, or your father in the next world — and that's the most certain of all.'

Even though her death is not unequivocally depicted by the author as a suicide, one can detect Hadoula's suicidal urges in the above lines. She declares that there are three possible solutions for her: to return home, to go to prison, or to die. The fact that she sees death as the most likely scenario makes one believe that she considered suicide. Similar suicidal trends appear later in story, where she says to Father Josaphat:

'Ach! Father Josaphat,' said Frankojannou in a sorrowful outburst. 'If only I were a bird to fly away!'

and also:

‘I should like to flee away from the world, old man. I can’t stand any more!’

The metaphor is very strong and indicative of her intentions.[5]

During the persecution, Hadoula does not seem to regret her actions. In contrast, she attempts to murder Kambanachmakis’ daughters, but the murders never take place because ‘the door opened and in came Kambanachmakis’.

Her last murder is a baby she had attempted to kill once before Kambanachmakis’ daughters, but had been unsuccessful. The second time, though, her attempt is successful:

With her own hand she squeezed the throat hard...

However, the baby’s grandmother wakes up and sees the crime. Then, she calls out for help:

‘Catch her!... Catch her! She’s done us a murder!’

The novel ends with the death of Hadoula who drowns during the persecution. Her death, given that the sea was believed to be connected to divine punishment, combines elements of ‘divine and human justice’:[6]

Old Hadoula met her death at the passage of the Holy Saviour on the neck of the sand that links the Hermitage rock with dry land, half-way across, midway between divine and human justice.

Independently of how one explains her death - a result of divine justice, human justice, or both - Hadoula’s death can be seen as the escape she wishes for earlier in the novel: to leave the earthly world. Hadoula applied her own ethical code

and did not regret her actions. Her flight was not just an attempt to avoid imprisonment, but a refusal to be judged according to the ethical principles of an organised society. The reader, despite being skilfully drawn by the author into Hadoula’s motivations, realises that there is no alternative but for Hadoula to die - she is, after all, a criminal.

The profile of 'The Murderess'

As one can see in the novel, Hadoula has a certain degree of medical knowledge and skills which she puts to good use and bad. We see many examples of her medical practice:

Last of all Frankojannou, who knew more than all the others, was summoned to help. Marousa had begun to despair of the first three ‘nurses’. She took refuge in Frankojannou as a last hope. And indeed old Hadoula with the drugs and potions and the hot and cold drinks she gave her patient, and with massages which she administered with much higher skill than the others, succeeded in a few days in inducing an abortion.

On another occasion:

Hadoula happened to know that one of those two young men suffered from asthma. Not long ago he had been begging her son-in-law to get the old woman to make him up some medicine.

Hadoula was not a medical practitioner according to modern terms; nevertheless, she was trusted by others and, apparently, she was the best in treating patients in her small society.

This part of the novel where Hadoula treats patients with her ‘unorthodox’ methods provides us with useful historical information on certain treatments in the nineteenth and early in the twentieth century. Hadoula’s treatments involved drinks (hot and

cold), drugs, potions and massages. Frequently in the story, she collects herbs to produce her 'medicines'.

Unfortunately, though she could cure others, she failed to diagnose and treat her own malady. Analysing her personality, we see that Hadoula had certain obsessions which fed her madness. She believed that by murdering young girls, she would help them and their families, too. She lived in a state where she misunderstood her actions and their results. She even convinced herself that God was agreeable to her actions to murder girls.[4] She also expressed suicidal urges, as her wish to fly like a bird and leave the world could be seen as a reference to suicide.[7]

Throughout the novel, Hadoula appears to have severe sleep issues, a common symptom for patients with mental illnesses:[8]

Sleeplessness was in Frankojannous's nature and in her temperament. She thought over a thousand things, and sleep did not come to her easily. Her ponderings and memories, dim images of the past, arose in her mind one after the other like waves that her soul could see.

The old woman woke with a shock, terror-stricken. She started up anguished yet rested. That short sleep had wiped away her nervous restlessness.

She woke up shaking, unhappy, frenzied. She shut her eyes and began to hum to herself, murmuring a song like a lament, but she could not sleep. Her fears and phantasms returned and besieged her.

She slept in her hiding-place in the dark and brinish cave that night. Echoes boomed in her ears. The waves foamed under her feet with prolonged roars of rage. Deep in her breast, she heard the weeping of innocent infants. Speechless whistles of the distant wind reached her.

When awake, Hadoula experienced hallucinations:

As she went out, the lamenting voice of the infant, the tiny girl unjustly slain, moaned inside her. She stood in the doorway, peering carefully outside, right and left, up and down the road.

It was not the first time she had heard that sorrowful infant cry in the cavernous, echoing darkness of her soul. Now she thought she was escaping from danger and disaster, but she carried her wound with her. She imagined herself escaping from dungeons and prison, but prison and Hell were within her.

Her bad sleep and hallucinations denote a kind of mental unrest.[9] This madness is also manifested in her first unsuccessful attempt to murder her last victim, where:

...as if she were mad, caught in the delusion of a dream, she put out her hand towards the cradle in which the little one was howling.

As she made the gesture with her fingers to strangle the infant, Hadoula:

...was feeling a savage joy.

The incident shows that she found satisfaction in the act of murdering. Despite the feeling of guilt, she does not truly regret the murders and sees her actions as an ethical mission.

Conclusion

Papdiamantis' Hadoula has obsessions, suicidal urges, sleep issues and hallucinations. If her murderous nature is disregarded for a moment, she comes across as a strong woman, one who realises the unfair conditions of the man-made society she lives in and who refuses vehemently to accept these

conditions. Unfortunately, her reaction to this patriarchal society goes beyond the limits of the healthy and the ethically correct. The narrative forces the reader to consider the perspective of a person in Hadoula's situation who cannot see her actions as what they really are: murders. In contrast, she sees them as ethical, and

of great benefit to her victims and to their families. Representations of madness in literature allow one exposure to the experiences of fictional characters, and can be used for generating discussions around and augmenting the understanding of diverse manifestations of illness, pain and suffering.

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