

NEW TRENDS IN TURKISH LITERATURE IN THE LAST DECADES OF THE 20TH CENTURY

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The aim of this article is to briefly describe the new conceptions and issues of contemporary Turkish literature from the middle of the 1980s to the end of the century. A new social, political and cultural environment, which was created in this time in Turkey, was radically different to that of previous decades. The outcome has been a transition from nationalism to a more liberal understanding of the state and society by most Turkish intellectuals.

During the early years of the Republic of Turkey a series of reformations aimed at the transformation of the country along Western lines. The consciousness of national identity was an important aspect of the Kemalist transformation. Nationalism in search of a secular and national state of Western type, as well as an innovated national language, dominated the Republican regime. Taken as a whole the cultural Kemalist movement denotes a revolution 'from above' depending on a single party, that is, a core group of state elites ruling an authoritarian state.

This movement is usually referred as "the modernizing project".¹ The other motivation behind this radical transformation was to demolish all the existing Islamic bonds with the Ottoman past. The rejection of tradition imagines modernism as beginning a *tabula rasa*, which in the Kemalist movement empowers the central authority, namely the state, to construct a new identity. This transaction is carried out with the help of a distracted and attenuated memory. The change of the alphabet permitted the state to achieve this task. Regardless of the

¹ See for ex.: Mardin, Şerif: Projects as Methodology. In: Bozdoğan, Sibel and Kasaba, Reşat (ed.): *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*. Seattle, University of Washington Press 1997, pp. 64-80; Keyman, Fuat: Kemalizm, Modernite, Gelenek. *Toplum ve Bilim*. 1977, No. 72, pp. 84-99.

sexual, ethnic, linguistic, and religious differences among the 'citizens', now the whole nation was to be defined as the 'nation of Turks' (*Türk Uluşu*).

In accordance with the concept of revolution 'from above', and as a result of a positivist mentality, Kemalist intellectuals were believed to be the basic source for the enlightenment of society. The Platonist understanding of society as a domain of prescribed values and relations led Kemalists to develop a new world view, which might be defined as Republican epistemology.² This epistemology asks for a more holistic, if not totalitarian, social and cultural order, embedded in the new constructed identity. Literature and other mediums, as well as the intellectuals, are all tools used to establish and fortify Kemalism as a social, political, and cultural cult.

The prominent examples of early Republican literature are those that show a keen interest in Kemalist ideals. The main literary personalities are Atatürk's close friends Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, Faliş Rıfki Atay, Halide Edip Adivar and Ruşen Eşref Ünaydın. The works of these authors bear the characteristic ideological structure of nineteenth century romanticist novels. Thematically, the novels are structured around a conflict between a 'good' and an 'evil' character, where the author definitely backs and reinforces the former. In these novels the clash of characters represents a conflict between the 'archaic' and modern Kemalist mentalities, which ends up with the heroic triumph of the latter.

The literature developed on Kemalist principles, from the early 1920s up until the 1970s, was based on a lack of awareness concerning the 'self'. The problematic in the novels of that period is a descriptive representation of existing conditions, rather than a critical approach. The main characters' identities were determined by ideology: whether heroes or villains, these characters are not self-aware. They are imagined to signify a component of the social structure. This has prevented the authors from achieving a more metaphysical style and discourse. Novelists of the early republican period are chroniclers of history, a tradition whose roots are to be found in the nineteenth century.

However, the period of the 1970s is not so clear-cut. The most important literary figures of the period that objected to the cult of literature based on Kemalism, are in fact Kemalists. Attilâ İlhan and Kemal Tahir, both Marxists, are the prominent names of the period. Tahir was more critical of Kemalism, with a speculative approach going so far as to accuse Atatürk of being a tool of the imperialist powers. He believed that any nation deprived of its past would be open to further colonization and exploitation. Tahir's solution to the problem was to revisit the history and revive the glory of the Ottoman Empire.

On the other hand, Attilâ İlhan has always been a more complicated and impressive personality. He always described himself as a Marxist and tried to merge Kemalism with Marxism, in search of a nationalist synthesis. Undoubtedly he played the leading role in the reconstruction of Kemalism, but this did not prevent

² Kadioğlu, Ayşe: Republican Epistemology and Islamic Discourses in Turkey in the 1990s. *The Muslim World*. 1998. No 1, pp. 1-21.

him from taking a critical position toward what he defined as "official and bureaucratic Kemalism". In this context, İlhan tried to show that the nationalism embedded in Kemalism should only be viewed as an anti-imperialist, modernizing approach. According to İlhan, Kemalism should not be considered antithetical to the Ottoman heritage. Kemalism differentiates between the West's technology and its culture, accepting the first without reservation, while rejecting the latter. In fact, this very approach of dividing Western metaphysics in two has a long tradition that predated Kemalism. It is also common in Third World and postcolonial countries, where the nationalist intelligentsia plays the constructive and leading role.³

İlhan's ideas, as well as his tempestuous and provocative assaults on the West, have entailed the reintroduction of the Ottoman past into the literary field. This should not be seen as a hasty and meager polemic between various camps, but rather as the first step towards the reconstruction of the lost memory and the rediscovery of the past.

The poetry of Hilmi Yavuz, a poet from the next generation, made a return to the Ottoman heritage in the 1970s and influenced the young poets. Yavuz, himself a scholar, argued that culture should encompass the past. This idea gained more supporters in the 1980s and 1990s.

In 1980 the military took control of power with a *coup d'état* in Turkey. The army believed that the principles of Kemalism had been distorted during the political unrest and violence of the 1970s. Kemalism was believed to be the only uniting factor for the ultimate good of the nation. The following three years gave rise to a new society obeying the official ideology and the reinforcement of the state with extraordinary powers. The new constitution prepared was the basic document or text reflecting this understanding and attitude.

After the 1983 elections, in which only three parties were allowed to participate, the ANAP (*Anavatan Partisi* / Motherland Party) gained power. This party was a political unit organized by bureaucrats and middle class businessmen, aiming to interact not with the rural classes but for the first time, with the metropolitan areas. ANAP also rejected the political differentiation of the left and right wings, and declared itself to be a political organization uniting all the different ideologies. This was the continuation of the process of de-politicization started by the military regime. In the next phase, ANAP, refuting the exceptionality of the state, followed a more liberal economic, social and cultural policy in accordance with the post-modern questioning of the period, affirming the end of ideologies and grand narratives.

During the 1980s, Turkey was connected more strongly with other parts of the world thanks to progress in communications and transport. In the late 1980s the state monopoly over broadcasting was broken by the establishment of private television channels. This had a significant two-fold impact: first, the country was emerging from its isolation and breaking its introvert condition; and second, the

³ See Chatterje, Partha: *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton: Princeton University Press 1993.

concept of censorship and the state power attached to it was abandoned. The mid and late 1980s were marked by the liberalization of the economy, which is believed to give birth to political liberalization.

In the late 1980s, the world witnessed a new set of developments known as globalization. This new concept is of vast concern and several definitions have been offered to describe it. On the political level, globalization witnesses the crisis of the nation-state. The transition from nation-state governments to an international governance system had a radical impact on the understanding of modernity in the West. Turkey has felt the consequences of these new formations as well. All the established concepts of modernity, attached to 'official' definitions, have been subject to change. In this respect, the discourse of 'national unity' assuming a homogenous collective identity has been strongly challenged. Individuality and the notion of 'self' emerged as new subjects of interest.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the social sphere has been the ground for new demands concerning the acceptance of ethnic, sexual, linguistic, and religious identities. A more pluralist and multicultural period is under construction, but it is not possible to say that it is a simple process. The expectations and struggles for the establishment of a new identity is a consequence of a fundamentalist upsurge criticizing the notion of secularism in Turkey and questioning the authority of the state. Two basic points epitomize this development: in this period collective identity is regarded as the 'national' identity, and citizenship is replaced by the awareness of self. The notion of self, pertaining to 'will' and the conceptualization of 'being in the world', challenges limitations of the existing definition of identity,⁴ when identity is taken to be given and constructed.

Finally, also linked to the globalization process is the transition from nationalism to multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is neither one culture merging with another, nor the unification of different cultures. Multiculturalism is the space for the existence of different cultures; it is not the imposition of a unique and predetermined cultural form, norm and understanding of a transcendental authority suppressing the others.⁵

The early attempts to break away from the republican epistemology are reflected in the ideas developed by Islamist intellectuals and writers in the 1980s. Islamist Intellectuals⁶ have gained a significant place in the intellectual realm.

⁴ Foucault, Michel: *Technologies of the Self*. London, Tavistock Publishing Ltd. 1989, pp. 28-34.

⁵ Hyman, Eric: Metaphor, Language, Games, Cultures. In: Eddy, R. (ed.): *Reflections on Multiculturalism*. Yarmouth, Intercultural Press 1996, pp. 61-78.

⁶ "While he is more or less independent of a century of Islamist criticism of Westernization, the new Muslim intellectual is very much the product of the post-1950 secular Turkish Republic. This background differentiates him from earlier Islamist thinkers in Turkey. The kind of language he uses, the literary works he cites or analyses, the stance he takes toward Westernism and secularism...are unprecedented, even though much of his thinking falls more or less squarely within what might be called a tradition of Islamist resistance and opposition." Meeker, Michael E.: *The New Muslim Intellectuals in the Republic of Turkey*. In: Tapper, R. (ed.): *Islam in Modern Turkey: Religion, Politics and Literature in a Secular State*. London, I.B. Tauris, 1994, pp. 189-190.

The more interesting point is the Islamist intellectual's use of contemporary 'pure Turkish' in his literary works. This is contrary to conservative tradition that usually prefers archaic words and style. This characteristic is another sign of the dual role Islamist intellectuals play in the Turkish intellectual realm. On the one hand, he is the most radical opponent of the West and Westernization, on the other hand "he sees himself as living in a Westernized, and humanistic and secular society... Thus the concerns and the interests of the Muslim intellectual usually overlap with those of the secular intellectuals."⁷

Muslim intellectuals have no doubt widened the limits of literature and existing epistemology in Turkey. If progress has been made in the doubtfulness of the concept of truth, and if the borders of positivism have been crossed, this is due to the Islamist movement, which calls for the plurality of truth. This is the first radical attempt in the transgression of the logo centrism of modernism established in Turkey.⁸ The new self is left to himself after his emancipation period. In this process, poets like İsmet Özel, Sezai Karakoç and Cahit Zarifoğlu are prominent names. Especially İsmet Özel, a former radical leftist, has played a leading role in the poetry of the last twenty years along with his articles and books concentrating on more social and political issues. But even though Islamist intellectuals contributed much to enlarge the limits of the identity constructed by the Republican epistemology, in the final instance they also define a predictable identity determined by Islam, an identity also determined by a transcendental power, *Allah*, but not a radically liberated 'self'.

The second group of intellectuals who have developed a new literature relating to the transition from collective 'identity' to awareness of 'self' includes poets of the younger generation Osman Hakan A., Adnan Özer, Seyhan Erözçelik, Ali Asker Barut, Orhan Kahyaoğlu, Enver Ercan and Haydar Ergülen. While developing their own personal style, these poets share more or less common characteristics including reference to cultural heritage, the construction of new synthesis rhetoric, the use of archaic works, and an interest in traditions of mysticism. In this genre of literature the worlds reassemble a new consciousness as part of a discourse inclusive of a mystical mentality.

These poets do not share the political ideas of the Islamist intellectuals. However their works challenge the Republican epistemology and its idea of Language Reform. In this sense, the basic nationalist roots of the Republic have been criticized and the concept of being progressive has been transformed. For these poets the text itself is more important than the social contexts and referents.

In the late 1970s a younger generation of the Turkish writers began a new literary movement. Post-structuralistic thinkers predominantly influenced these writers, and the text was at the centre of their work. Deconstructionist approaches led them to a new enquiry in their works. One of the important authors of this

⁷ Ibid., p. 193.

⁸ See Helvacıoğlu, Banu: "Allahu Ekber". We are Turks Yearning for a Different Homecoming at the Periphery of Europe. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 17, 1996, No 3, pp. 503-523.

trend is Bilge Karasu whose works, particularly his international prize winning novel *Gece* (Night), were translated into various languages including English.⁹ As an old heroic figure of this movement Ece Ayhan is still influential on the younger generation. Enis Batur, a poet and essayist who declared Karasu as his master, is the most influential representative of this movement among the new generation.

The most gifted and influential prose writers, sometimes criticized for being influenced by Latin American magical realism, mark the second phase of this movement. However, their achievement has now gone beyond the suggested influence, and it is one of the most original movements of modern Turkish literature. The two leading names are Orhan Pamuk and Latife Tekin.

The understanding backing this literature lies in the importance, superiority, as well as the 'immunity' of the text. These writers who have taken a text-centric position have broken the classical forms of short story and novel. The short story has been transformed to narration or recitation or tale, whereas novels have been constructed on more abstract subject matters and combine different stylistic approaches. The basic point is that the text, taken as the centre, involves itself in the question of language with one specific constraint: language is not a possibility for liberation for these writers, but itself turns out to be a prison house. Yet all the limitations of language are questioned to a certain extent even if not in a destructive way but with a modernist taste. Actually, this point should be seen as the main constraint preventing the literature from becoming radical. The text, enabling the writer to demolish all the constraints of space and time, puts him in a contradictory situation. Among the new generation, some poets, such as Küçük İskender,¹⁰ and novelists, such as Latife Tekin, have a critical approach to language and their works attempt to pass beyond the boundaries of the language of canonized modern Turkish literature.

An independent self, a recently emerging figure in Turkish prose, stands in the middle of nowhere. Only through language can a bridge between the self and the outside world be constructed. The case confronted in Beckett and Kafka is usually reinvented in these works.

During this period, Turkey's satirical magazines were the main source of social criticism. They not only attacked established institutions, but also exposed the new identities emerging from the peripheries of the metropolitan cities. The emergent social criticism involved not only a political approach, but also a reminder of the past values forgotten because of social mobility and transformation. The values of the periphery were not used only for nostalgic approaches, but mainly as signifiers of the identity of the periphery. The subject is an immigrant from a small town or rural area, usually with little or no education. He or she is an unqualified worker, speaking a special language usually close to slang.

⁹ Karasu, Bilge: *Night*. (From Turkish trans. by Güneli Gün). Louisiana State University 1994.

¹⁰ The pseudonym Küçük İskender (Alexander the Little) is a sarcastic reminder of Alexander the Great.

The cartoonists and writers of these satire magazines were mainly brought up in this environment. In fact, the criticism was established by using and emphasizing the language developed in these regions. Introduction of this exclusive language together with a special 'black humour' was the social criticism itself. Pun, onomatopoeia, and word play were included.

Not only was a new language developed, but it also brought to the scene previously unknown characters; this period ended with an outstanding cult novel by Metin Kaçan, *Ağır Roman*.¹¹ The novel plotted in the outskirts of the city was written entirely in a special language and a specific rhetoric. A totally metaphorical rhetoric recalls the *écriture automatique* of surrealist writing and makes the novel unique. Latife Tekin's novels plotted in the same environment and using similar stylistic elements, depending on a metaphorical 'magic language' which recalls Gabriel García Márquez, have made an impact on the literature of the 1980s.

A new literary genre based on the refutation of all established moral, social, and normative values emerged in the late 1980s, mainly with the efforts of Küçük İskender. Refusing any affiliation with existing social, political, cultural and moral norms, İskender proposed a new understanding of ethics mainly by criticizing the established sexual identity and roles. The subject that appeared in his works no longer represents the collective identity defined by cultural authority, but a self-awareness of his sexual choice as a gay man. In a country where alternative sexual identities have been repressed this was a courageous move. İskender also brought a new and daring approach to other traditional values in his prose poems, usually creating a special world of homoeroticism.

Writing with a broad range of surreal images reflecting impressions derived from drug culture, and always insisting on non-compromising criticism, İskender has been the fervent supporter of a new literary movement that might be defined as underground literature. Rock culture, drugs, heavy metal music, images of technology, mourning, a new language based on word play are the characteristics of this movement. The uncomfortable personality in these works is trying to construct a new identity defying the given conditions of sexuality.

Sunay Akin and Akgün Akova are other poets who are usually content with the social criticism and the destruction of the language, but not concerned with homoerotic sexuality. This movement also proposed a new understanding of ethics to replace existing traditional moral values. The new concept includes individuality, the emancipation of the self, the reconstruction of the social norms, a new concept of sexuality and love. The new genre even seems to be a radical and romantic one, having strong affiliation with the poetry of Attilâ İlhan and Ece Ayhan.

The last attempt at the de-centralization of the literature in the process of creating a new 'self' beyond the national-collective and uniform identity constructed

¹¹ The title *Ağır Roman* has triple meaning in Turkish: 'A Serious Novel', 'Gross Gypsy' and 'The Gypsy Dance'.

by the Turkish nation-state has come from the 'others'. The attempts to construct a Kurdish literature, even if it has not yet been fully established, play a leading role in this process. In Anatolia, there exist more than twenty-five different ethnicities and languages; some of them are about to disappear. The non-Muslim Armenian and Assyrian cultures, for example, are now being studied with attempts at reinvigoration. Many Kurdish and non-Muslim minority origin poets and authors, such as Yılmaz Odabaşı, Bejan Matur, and Mıgırdıç Margosyan, have risen from this trend.

The literature developed by second and third generation Turks living in Europe and writing in different languages has also become quite influential.¹² The works of Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Zafer Şenocak and of many others writers of Turkish origin living and writing abroad there won prestigious prizes and have been translated into Turkish.

Finally, there is the literature of mainly Turkish-speaking communities of Bulgaria, the countries of former Yugoslavia, and also Northern Cyprus. Because of their rich heritage of poetry since the Ottoman time, and their ties with the literature of modern Turkey as well as world literature, the literary activities of the communities mentioned above take part in the development of Turkish literary tradition.

In a global era, the period of liberalization in 1980s and 1990s brought major changes to literary understanding, and gave birth to a new set of literary movements. These movements and approaches involve a radical transition from the literature developed in the Republican era. While literary personalities of the Republican period contributed to the construction of new identities along the lines of the nation-state, in the new period studied, a debate has emerged on the deconstruction of identity and the construction of new 'selves', which emphasize a specific notion of 'rootlessness' and emancipation. Where formerly identity shaped the literary culture, the new literary movements have been more opened to interaction, taking culture as the starting point and main determinant of the process. Religion and mysticism, consciousness of ethnic background, the conceptualization of sexual identity, a new understanding of ethnics, and new uses of the Turkish language are remarkable elements of this new development. Language has a primary importance in this area, and it is possible to say that globalization enabled the people of letters to say, "I am other and different", rejecting the authorities' control over identity and self.

¹² Celnarová, Xénia: The Migration of Turks and 'New Homeland' – Turkish Literature on Germany and in Germany. In: *Altaica Budapestinensia MMII*. Proceedings of the 45th International Altaistic Conference. Ed. By Sárközy, A. and Rákos, A. Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest 2003, pp. 74-78.