

## THE GATHERING PLACE OF THE DJINNI

One image that is utterly difficult to put into words when writing in Turkey and in Turkish is the image of **the threshold**. A zone that belongs to neither “here” nor “there”, neither “inside” nor “outside”, neither “East” nor “West”... a space of ambiguity and in-betweenness is the most difficult to describe for a writer.

The cultural distrust of thresholds extends back in time and has a historical background deeply-embedded in our subconscious. After all, the Ottomans were profoundly suspicious of the thresholds, which they regarded as “the gathering place of the djinni”, so perilous, elusive and unreliable. When entering into a new building, for instance, or going to the bathroom at night or simply leaving your house to go outside on the street... whatever you did you were strongly urged to take uttermost care not to step onto a threshold and to utter a prayer if you had to do so. Thresholds were designed for Allah’s uncanny creatures while choosing sides and remaining solidly anchored therein was deemed of human beings.

What happened to the thresholds as Turkey threaded its way from a multiethnic, multilingual, multifaith empire to a supposedly monolithic nation-state in 1923?

The transformation to a secular, modern, nation-state has hitherto generally been interpreted as an overall progress in almost every sphere of social and individual life. Westerners and Turkish scholars alike have oftentimes automatically associated modernization with the emergence of civil society, with the liberation of the individual from the yoke of traditions, with political equality, democracy and dynamism. According to the dominant discourse in Turkey, the shift from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic has been a radical change from traditional to modern, from religious to secular, from static to dynamic, as well as from a multiethnic empire to a homogeneous, united nation-state. Likewise, the renovation that took place in Turkish history has also been interpreted as a move from a patriarchal society into one in which women were emancipated. Leaving all these points of emphasis aside for a moment, I am going to

propose to see the construction and consolidation of the modern Republican regime as a move from a threshold-suspicious society to a threshold-intolerant state.

One of the very first things the Kemalist elite achieved in Turkey in order to modernize, Westernize and secularize the society from above was to reshape the Turkish language. Language and literature were given a privileged position in the project of culture-building. Turkish language was reviewed, recreated, and remolded. The alphabet being completely changed Turkish society became unable to read its tombstones. Words of Arabic and Persian origin were purged; concomitantly, countless expressions of folk and mystic origins were sent to exile. Although oral language could not be easily controlled and thereby managed to retain its autonomy, the written language was systematically centralized, homogenized, Turkified. Different languages of the numerous minorities could not find a voice in written culture. The “modernization” of Turkish language went hand in hand with “linguistic cleansing” and “linguistic homogenization”. Confident of their role as “social engineers of the new system” the reformist/Jacobinist elite of the new Turkey failed to see that we do not make language, language makes us.

Within this scheme the novel, as the genre of Westernization and modernization, as the locus of transformation, gained unusual importance and the novelists were given a special role as “fathers” of their readers, fathers expected to tell their sons the right from the wrong. The mainstream language of the Turkish novel became a disenchanted language and remained as such. The novel was regarded as a mostly, if not completely, cerebral and rational activity devoid of emotions. The father-novelists oftentimes acted as if they were operating above their readers, above their texts, above their characters, aspiring for a total control of the process of writing. By using a disenchanted language, defining the position of the novelist as a father or teacher, and associating the novel with solely masculinity and rationality, the genre of novel was defined as a basically Apollonian art and not as a Dionysian art.

As a writer who happens to be a woman and attached to Islamic, as well as Jewish and Christian heterodox heretic mysticism, I reject using the rationalized, disenchanted,

centralized, Turkified modern language put in front of me. Today in Turkey language is polarized and politicized. Depending on the ideological camp you are attached to, e.g. Kemalists versus Islamists, you can use an either “old” or a “new” set of words. The fact that my writing is replete with both “old” and “new” words, and Sufi expressions has been extensively criticized by the conventional cultural elite. I refuse to choose. I refuse to pluck words out of language. I feel like a language orphan. Borges had oftentimes remarked that his grandmother’s dry English was the origin of his concise style. My experience is quite the opposite. My grandmother’s language which is a mixture of women’s sphere, oral culture, folk Islam, superstitions, supernaturalism and spirituality cannot be directly ferried to the highbrow genre of the novel. Images are lost on the way because there exist no matching words.

I wrote my most recent novel in English. Switching from writing fiction in Turkish to writing fiction in English has been painful and challenging. I wrote with an instinctual resistance to a sense of loss, as if I had a phantom limb. And yet at the same time, I very much enjoyed writing in English because it gave me more space for ambiguity and flexibility. As soon as my novel was out in Turkey, I was extensively criticized for abandoning my native tongue, for committing some sort of a cultural betrayal. While my nationalist critics kept asking where would I now belong, “either to Turkish or to English literature?”, I believe their question is wrongly and rigidly formulated. I believe it is possible to be “both... and...” instead of “either...or” in this world, or at least in the world of fiction.

One can be multicultural, multilingual and yes, multifaith.

Writing fiction necessitates thresholds. Literature thrives upon the desire to transcend, to move far beyond our boundaries –be it in terms of national, ethnic or religious or gender identities. The ability to transform, to be as flexible and fluid as water, to step onto the thresholds is today, as it was in the past, what constitutes the core of the art of fiction.

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