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The Role of the Intellectual in Contemporary Turkish Women's Narratives

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Adile Aslan,
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Abstract: In her article "The Role of the Intellectual in Contemporary Turkish Women's Narratives" Adile Aslan analyzes the figure of the woman intellectual in two of the most widely praised novels written in Turkish, Adalet Ağaoğlu's 1971 *Ölmeye Yatmak* (Lying Down to Die) and Leyla Erbil's 1985 *Karanlığın Günü* (The Day of Darkness). Aslan discusses how the two authors represent in their texts intertwined personal histories with political history. The novels present, as well as surmount the obstacles that the current socio-historical conditions impose on people in general and intellectuals in particular and how these circumstances have a bearing on their private and public lives.

Adile ASLAN

The Role of the Intellectual in Contemporary Turkish Women's Narratives

In this study I draw on Sibel Erol's article "Discourses on the Intellectual: The Universal, the Particular and Their Mediation in the Works of Nazlı Eray" where Erol uses Eray's works to show the turn from universalist intellectualism to particularist intellectualism. Erol elaborates on Bruce Robbins's definition of the intellectual as a degendered individual. For Erol, the degendered intellectual occupies an important position in society, although this representation is a comparatively new phenomenon. Further, Erol emphasizes Antonio Gramsci's understanding of the universalist, disinterested, and socially rootless intellectual as transformed to a class based intellectual. For Gramsci, intellectuals are of significance in the maintenance and reproduction of hegemonic order through political and cultural means. Scholars, lawyers, scientists, administrators, philosophers, and writers represent a historical continuity uninterrupted even by the most complicated and radical changes in political and social forms. Intellectuals remain autonomous and independent of the dominant social group. Gramsci's emplacement of the intellectual within a class initiates the idea of intellectuals as a class. Zygmunt Bauman asserts that the term intellectual is coined for those who "rise above the partial preoccupation of one's own profession or artistic genre and engage with the global issues of truth, judgment and taste of the time" (2). Bauman summarizes the transition from the universalist intellectual to the particularist intellectual through the concepts of modern and post-modern: "If, from the modern point of view, relativism of knowledge was a problem to be struggled against and eventually overcome in theory and in practice, from the post-modern point of view relativity of knowledge (that is, its 'embeddedness' in its own communally supported tradition) is a lasting feature of the world" (4). Thus, the universalist intellectual is a representation of the modern outlook, whereas the particularist intellectual is a representative of the postmodern perspective. Bauman expands the underlying meaning of these two kinds of the intellectual through two impressive metaphors: legislator and interpreter. For Bauman, the legislator is the best figurative tool to clarify the conceptualization of the intellectual in the modernist approach: the duties of the modern intellectual include "making authoritative statements which arbitrate in controversies of opinions and which select those opinions which, having been selected, become correct and binding" (4). According to Bauman, both the modern intellectual and the knowledge they generate are extra-territorial, unrestricted by local concerns, which authorizes them "to validate (or invalidate) beliefs which may be held in various sections of society" (5). In contrast with the modern legislator intellectual, the postmodern intellectual can be best described as "the interpreter" the duties of whom include "translating statements, made within one communally based tradition, so that they can be understood within the system of knowledge based on another tradition" and the postmodern intellectual is interested "facilitating communication between autonomous (sovereign) participants" instead of "the best social order" of the modern intellectual (5). Bauman warns against the fallacy that the modern strategy is dismissed as a result of the transition to the postmodern one and points out that whereas the universalistic ambitions of the intellectuals' own tradition are left behind, the universalistic ambitions of the intellectuals towards their own tradition are retained. The postmodern intellectual still resumes the right to legislate about procedural rules, to arbitrate controversies of opinion, and make statements intended as binding.

Following Bauman's propositions, Donna Haraway's alerts us to "recogniz[e] our own 'semiotic technologies' for making meanings" (579). Similar to Pierre Bourdieu and James Clifford, Haraway wants us to be more perceptive of the presuppositions of the sciences and of "the ability partially to translate knowledges among very different — power-differentiated — communities" (580). Haraway rejects objectivity as a "leap out of the marked body and conquering gaze from nowhere."(580) Only through accepting "the particularity and embodiment of all vision … and not giving in to the tempting myths of vision as a route to disembodiment and second-birthing," we could get out of "all the visualizing tricks and powers of modern sciences and technologies that have transformed the objectivity debates" (582). Haraway pleads for "contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections" to transform the systems of knowledge and ways of seeing (585). For Harraway, "there is no way to "be" simultaneously in all, or wholly in any, of the privileged (i.e., subjugated)

positions structured by gender, race, nation and class. … The search for such a "full" and total position is the search for the fetishized perfect subject of oppositional history (586). Finally, Harraway indicates that the transformation of knowledge in all discourses, and especially those of the intellectual, promotes locatable, critical, responsible situated knowledges as opposed to irresponsible, distorted claims of disembodied, unmarked, transcendent, and unmediated knowledges (587).

Erol discusses the Turkish intellectual — by means of the examples of Enis Batur and Atilla Ilhan — and suggests that the discourse of the intellectual proceeds in an opposite direction in comparison with the West. Erol makes it clear that in the Turkish case the discourse of the intellectual moves from the particular to the universal. Intellectuals are accused of being representative of certain opinions, partisan of particular tendencies or exponent of specific political dispositions, advised to be cured of their partiality and represent the whole humanity impartially. Erol claims that the challenging questions and answers related to the intellectual come from women authors such as Fürüzan, Sevgi Soysal, Pınar Kür, Adalet Ağaoğlu, Leyla Erbil, Nazlı Eray, and Latife Tekin and she states that "in re-examining from a female and a feminist perspective notions such as self, other, society, family, knowledge and intellectual," Turkish women writers have attempted to replace "the false abstractions of the existing universalist discourse" with that of specificity (35).

Adalet Ağaoğlu, one of the most critically acclaimed writers in contemporary Turkish literature, is among the leading modernist writers in Turkey. Although her *Üç Beş Kişi* (*Summer's End)* and *Yazsonu* (*Curfew*) have been published in English, her other novels and writings have not been translated into English or any other languages hitherto, which, I believe, is a great omission and misfortune for world literature. Theater criticism and poems constitute the first phase of her literary career**,** which is approximately from the 1950s to 1970s, a period in which she worked for the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation. Since the publication of her first novel, *Ölmeye Yatmak* (Lying Down to Die) in 1973, she has concentrated on novels and short stories. Jale Parla defines Ağaoğlu as one of the earliest and most important modern Turkish novelists who focus on time/life/narrative together with Oğuz Atay after Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (305) and she points out that "according to Ağaoğlu, people, like societies, are influenced by the ideological movements of history" (306). Almost resonating Erol's thought, Parla observes that "identity, sexual oppression or repression, freedom and resistance" are, thus, the main themes in her writings (306). *Ölmeye Yatmak*, the first novel of her trilogy named *Dar Zamanlar* (Narrow Times) is an attempt to narrate the narrow timeframes in the consciousness of the narrator/protagonist during the last hours of her life. The main narrator and the protagonist Aysel, a university professor, decides to commit suicide and lies down to die in a room in the sixteenth floor of a hotel in Ankara at 7:22, but leaves the room after 8:49. In this nearly one and half hour, the reader glimpses an account of her life from 1938, when she is an underprivileged primary school student in a provincial town to the last years of 1960s when she is a university professor in Ankara, married to another professor. Aysel is "an isolated individual on the verge of suicide … a woman ridden by sexual guilt … a public intellectual turned into a housewife" which is represented by "the transformation of the program for a national salvation into a pot of *dolma*" (Irzık 553). Sibel Irzık calls attention to the anonymity of the hotel room and the nakedness of Aysel's body, which symbolizes her retreat from both "socially scripted roles and imposed identities she has so far assumed" (551). Similarly, Parla claims that the intellectual Aysel rejects the ready-made identity and at the end of the novel "leaves the hotel room to face the life with its crises, stripped of the feeling of the culturally defined mission" (Parla 314). Erol regards the novel as a questioning of the official Kemalist ideology and an opening up of the restrictions it brings with it (Erol 8). Aysel's personal history is closely intertwined to that of the Turkish Republic/nation. Her memories date back to 1938, the year in which Atatürk dies and the Turkish nation becomes fatherless, as Aysel recalls the fifteenth annual celebration of the Turkish Republic, organized by the idealist Kemalist school teacher, Dündar.

Not only Aysel's remembrances, but also those of the other characters, as well as the textual pieces in the novel narrated by unknown third persons are so intertwined with the political history of the nation that at times it becomes difficult to dissociate the personal motives from state ideology. Of these instances, Aysel's nightmare towards the end of the novel is one of the most quoted passages:

I have found the most definitive formula to develop and save Turkey. I am in a place that resembles a wax museum. Two guards from Victorian England stand before a high gate. They don't move. Confidently, I walk

through this gate. I seem to know that the guards will not stop me because they are made of wax. Having walked through the door, I find myself in a long and narrow hall. A long, narrow table is placed across the hall. And beyond the table are a series of cloaked men with green faces. They, too, are motionless. But I am certain that right after I present my dissertation they will come to life … Their green faces will go from pink to white as they cheer "Viva! Viva!" Atatürk will then kiss me on the forehead, I tell myself. He will point with the index finger of his right hand and just as he had said "Armies! Your first destination is the Mediterranean. Advance!" he will say: "Turkish nation! Your destination is to follow the road that this woman shows, advance!" But, just as I am standing there before Atatürk and the other old professors, I find myself at ten years of age … At that moment, the head of the fox fur collar hanging around my neck comes to life. The mouth of the fox keeps biting my chain … [Atatürk] waves the leather glove he is holding in his left hand to my face [and] keeps asking, "where is your dissertation? Let us see your dissertation. Show it." … I suddenly realize that what I have put before [the cloaked professors] is not my thesis but a whole pot of *dolma*. I am very embarrassed, especially because I am in Atatürk's presence. But I cannot see Atatürk. The person I thought was Atatürk turns out to be a hunter. (Ağaoğlu 298; trans. Irzık, "Allegorical Lives" 552)

Parla maintains that "regressive, infantilized, and fearful, vacillating between over confidence and angst, the dream stands for the subconscious of the whole Turkish nation" (313). In Irzık's reading along the lines of Fredric Jameson's theory of national allegory, Aysel — the asexual, chaste, and modern Turkish woman — agonizes by her sense of guilt over her adultery, the private and unconscious sphere of her life intruded by the public figures, political missions, and national discourses as in her dream the oppressive demands on the citizens of the nation through the roles assigned by the father(s) of the nation occur.

During the fifteenth annual celebration of the Turkish Republic, organized by the idealist Kemalist school teacher, there is a close connection between the school play presented, "The Professions" and Aysel's dream. In the school play, due to the financial difficulties and the scarcity of material resources of most of the families except for state bureaucrats, the children appear in ill-fitting costumes, forget their lines, and girls and boys are uncomfortable dancing together. Aysel cannot be the free and modern but chaste Turkish woman advocated by the state ideology: "I have studied and read all that, I have learnt … I have run and run … I am almost tired. Almost time to retire to a corner. Almost … Yet still the motherland … To save, to dignify, to learn, to teach, to run more … to civilize more … West … Under-developed … Well-developed … Developing that is to say … To Save still … To be Saved … (Ağaoğlu 269; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine). It is suggested that the role assigned to individuals by the state is too big to fit, like Aysel's shoes in the children's play. In short, while the school play is the representation of the Turkish nation with its ill-fitting roles and actors, Aysel's dream represents the guilt-ridden subconscious of the nation on account of the sense of failure. The stifling anxiety to accomplish the national role and the unavoidable sense of guilt due to the failure in the highest mission is discernible both in the play and in the dream. The school play is also used by the author to depict the insipid language of the official ideology and this symbolizes the prevalence of the ideological, collectivist discourse of the state in the unconsciousness of the citizens and their puppet-like existence (see Irzık 565).

Ölmeye Yatmak contradicts, to a certain extent, the roles assigned by Batur and Ilhan to Turkish intellectuals. First of all, since the protagonist is a woman intellectual, the notion of the republican intellectual — by definition men — is dismantled, while the conflicting demands imposed on women by the new state are also revealed (see, e.g., Ayse Parla). In her role as an intellectual Aysel discloses the contradictions in Atatürk's Turkey: she is an intellectual in the "Western" sense of the word and yet an anti-intellectual in the Turkish context owing to the prevalence of universalist intellectual idea as she fails to rise above the mundane. Through the distance between the intellectual and the masses, Ağaoğlu shows how all the other narratives (young Aysel's narrative being one of them) surrounding that of mature Aysel are full of repressions, mimicries, and ironies which undermine each other (see Irzık 554). In addition, the depiction of Ankara between the 1940s and late 1960s undercuts the official discourse further by showing the ideal Ankara in state ideology as a failed space.

Published in 1985, *Karanlığın Günü* (The Day of the Darkness), the second novel of Leyla Erbil, is an innovative text with modernist narrative techniques and new grammar. Blending technical features with content, Erbil addresses aesthetic expectations through social, cultural, and political issues. *Karanlığın Günü* relates the political deadlocks, historical impasses, cultural traumas with the power of a sharp observer. Like in *Ölmeye Yatmak*, the reader witnesses the thoughts which flow through a woman's consciousness in the course of a few hours in which the protagonist — Neslihan — tackles

her past, present and future. The underlying meaning behind the darkness of the day is not only because Neslihan dives in to pull out one by one those elements subsiding in the darkness of her unconscious (although finally she comes out and expresses her desires) but also because it exemplifies how women are trapped and pushed into passivity and forced into a pretentious life which abides by the rules society sets for them. Also, as female sexuality is suppressed by patriarchal, religious, and social demands while men are granted freedom and protection, the protagonist's experience of rape is commonplace and pushed into the unconsciousness of not only Neslihan but society as well. The narrative time of the novel is the twelve hours between the departure of Neslihan's husband for work and his return. Her thoughts, however, travel a much wider time distance to her childhood and back. The glass on the balcony door which has "years of mud and dirt built up on it" is identified with Neslihan's unconscious on the one hand, and on the other, it functions as a "mud mirror" which reflects to the reader the things that cross her mind "covered with secrets, with dirt, with mud, and with time, amidst the entangled ivy of the past and the present, are the games, the memories, historical dreams; they are what she desires" (9; unless indicated otherwise, all translations are mine).

The novel ends right where it begins, in Neslihan's sitting room in the armchair situated right opposite the balcony, glass, mirror. Neslihan is unable to move because of her illness, but she travels through her memories and amidst her roles of woman, wife, and motherhood. Her physical immobility is a metaphor of her entrapment in the patriarchal order, a site of confinement. Neslihan's intellectual identity heightens the drama, for despite being an educated woman, a distinguished author, and a political activist, Neslihan is confined to domesticity as required of women in Turkish society. Cooking, cleaning, taking care of the kids and her mother, Neslihan fails to make progress writing her novel and her husband — Sadrettin — asks her when she will be finished. Neslihan replies, "I'll finish it, don't worry, there are still a few things I need to do research on, and then, I can lock myself up in a hotel room and finish" (192). Sadrettin reacts to this in a negative manner and he turns their daughter Bilge against her mother too. Her husband and daughter complain as they remind Neslihan how she chose to finish writing a book away from home once before and made their lives miserable. To her husband and daughter, writing is an act which should not overshadow the "blessed family" but should be over and done with as quickly as possible and Neslihan's wish to retreat to a hotel room to finish her book is simply unacceptable.

Another space of societal and personal repression is the hospital, where Neslihan's mother receives treatment. It is not possible to speak of a "treatment"; instead, the hospital is a space where those who are not "normal" are kept under collective surveillance with an impersonal atmosphere, mechanical sounds, lacking privacy, and detached from all comfort. Similarly, the school which Neslihan's son Serhat attends is also a locus of power and repression: "There wasn't a day when my son would return home from school without beating up a poor destitute child weaker than himself; there'd be a mother and her child in tears at the door everyday; he was becoming more and more devious; he'd grab everything; the lamb chop with the most meat on, the larger cherry, he'd be the first to lay hands on them; we'd slap his hand, he'd gobble down everything on his plate before we finished, he'd ask for more and more, he'd steal sliced oranges and bananas from our plates. My mother would say 'He takes after his uncle! He was like that, all me me me; he wanted everything to be his!' My mother would laugh" (196). As social and collective spaces, schools can be seen as places where children are ingrained with the feeling of "power" whether it be physical power or the abstract power coming from knowledge and success as Michel Foucault explains: "Discipline' may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology. And it may be taken over either by 'specialized' institutions (the penitentiaries or 'houses of correction' of the nineteenth century), or by institutions that use it as an essential instrument for a particular end (schools, hospitals), or by pre-existing authorities that find in it a means of reinforcing or reorganizing their internal mechanisms of power" (215). In this sense, Serhat is influenced by the anatomy of the power he is subjected to under the guise of discipline and where he has begun to take advantage of the opportunities granted him by patriarchal order including sexual freedom.

Neslihan's mother, Nuriye, appears as a guardian of patriarchal order. For example, as she is washing her mother, Neslihan asks questions about her mother and father's sex life: "I soap her back, she likes that: my late husband would rub my back every once in a while, god bless him! Come on, god knows what you'd be up to in the hamam! She slaps the surface of the water: You indecent woman! You should be ashamed of yourself!" (49). When Neslihan speaks of sexuality, this drives Nuriye crazy and she accuses Neslihan of being indecent. Neslihan, on the other hand can tell that her mother derives great pleasure from the memory of those days although she is "ashamed" (49). Despite her desires, Nuriye chooses to suppress her sexuality, in accordance with the fashion of the society she lives in and locks it up behind closed doors and tells her daughter she does not know "stuff like that." On the other hand, she gladly turns a blind eye when her daughter is dating a man who has a car and covers up for her so that her husband does not find out. Nuriye is one of the most loyal subjects of social order who suppresses her sexuality and elevates patriarchal thought and power with the traditional roles she embraces. She takes up the position society assigns to her uncritically and is content to manipulate the restricted power bestowed on her.

One space Neslihan visits again and again in her memory is her friend Yıldız's house, where she often met with other intellectuals. The house and the meeting are significant because of the reference to the wealthy upper class of Turkish society which was not only wealthy in a monetary sense but also in the context of knowledge and intellectual interests (more often than not Westernized). Yıldız's house was a social space and in Neslihan's memory it is a reflection on class and the social group to which the narrator belonged and symbolizes the dilemmas she finds herself exposed to as a result of her intellectual identity. Moreover, all the social, political, and economic issues dealt with in the novel are all discussed with reference to the time they spend at Yıldız's house. The personal background of the narrator, her position in terms of economic standing and class all mark Yıldız's house as her social space. Neslihan cannot help disclosing the fact that although they claim to be an intellectual and liberal group of people of leftist tendencies, they somehow still act according to the class restrictions regulated by society and thus through the symbolism attached to Yıldız's home they hold on to their own small group, to their social class, to their bourgeois habits. It is through Yıldız's house that Neslihan places the intellectuals, including herself, into a certain place and space and class. What these people have in common is that they are all bourgeois intellectuals despite their claims to advocate a classless society. While Yıldız's house frames their social standing and background, it is Neslihan's stream of consciousness which deals with the more subjective history and personal characteristics of these intellectuals. In consequence, the protagonists of the novel are narrated only to the extent of what Neslihan shares with us. I argue that this feature of the novel represent the side the author takes in the discourse of the intellectual and suggests that there is no such a thing as a universalist intellectual, independent of his/her personal background and that every intellectual is situated in her/his subjective conditions and can see the world from the position he/she occupies. The dramatization of some of the intellectual figures in the novel evidences that in contradiction with the idea that intellectuals act independently of their personal history, subjective background and individual visions — which do not have any influence on the intellectual's propositions — Erbil locates them in their subjective backgrounds through extra personal information.

Finally, a brief mention of Bosporus Bridge complements my preceding discussion and connects it with *Ölmeye Yatmak* as the bridge stands for as the city Neslihan lives in (Istanbul). The bridge is likened at times to a guillotine, at one time to a coquettish woman all dressed up, and at another to an acrobat. However, the most important function of Bosporus Bridge has to do with its position uniting the continents of Europe and Asia. While traditional intellectuals argue for the existence of undisturbed historical unity, Neslihan is aware that there is no such thing as undisturbed historical unity, especially in the case of Turkey. The divided, shattered, and twisted conception of history is referred to several times throughout the novel via different images such as Atatürk photographs, postcards and sayings, speeches given about Atatürk, her mother's words concerning the War of Independence, her diary dating back to the 1930s, etc. Neslihan desires the unification of all these towards the end of the novel through the metaphor of Bosporus Bridge as the symbol of Istanbul: the hiatus in the line of history is closed, reuniting Asia and Europe. Nevertheless, Neslihan desires this unification in another order than the existing one, symbolized by the punctuations or rather lack thereof: "my sweet royal road that separates Asia from Europe and unites the west with east, its feet

planted against Byzantine and its neck hiding in the nook of Anatolia … If we let it be, would remain this way for centuries … but we fear that if it wished it could lure us all one by one to cross over it, therefore it's always on our minds always on our minds our sweet royal road" ("asyayı avrupadan ayıran doğuyla batıyı birleştiren kral yolum benim ayaklarını bizansa dayamış boynunu anadolu yakasına kuytuluğuna ... bırakırsak yüzyıllar böyle kalır mı ... ama isterse hepimizi birer birer ayartıp üstünden geçirtebileceğinden de korktuğumuz hep kendini düşündürten hep kendini düşündürten kral yolumuz bizim" (294-95). Thus, the unity Neslihan longs for is not in the existing symbolic order: she craves for another kind of order which would satisfy her desire for unity in a harmonious and peaceful manner. In some of the chapters of the novel where Neslihan's thoughts are delivered without punctuation, she contemplates on pigeons as a tribe and imagines the Bosporus Bridge as a woman acrobat amidst other complex imageries symbolizing her desire for a different kind of system other than the one she finds herself in. The most unmediated form of her imagination and un-/consciousness is reflected in fragments that swoop through her mind and what they underline is her desire as an intellectual for another social order in which unity could be achieved in harmony.

In conclusion, Ağaoğlu's *Ölmeye Yatmak* and Erbil's *Karanlığın Günü* are remarkable attempts to represent the dilemmas Turkish intellectuals confront in their personal lives, irreversibly connected to their individual background. The type of intellectuals that reader meets in these two novels can be called particularist intellectuals, embedded in their personal background and individual visions, as opposed to the groundless, free-floating universalist intellectuals. Whereas in *Ölmeye Yatmak* Aysel is the only intellectual figure about whom the reader is provided with a detailed personal narrative, in *Karanlığın Günü* a whole group of intellectuals is narrated. Both novels try to present, as well as surmount, the obstacles that the current socio-historical conditions in Turkey impose on people in general and intellectual in particular and how these circumstances have a bearing on their private and public lives. What these two novels highlight is the need for sufficient private room free of external intervention, whereby intellectuals act out their subjectivity.

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