

Dr. Nagihan Haliloğlu

Islamic or Republican? The Ottoman-Republican Turkish Divide in Contemporary Turkish Literature

The choice of which language or which version of a language an author will use is problematic particularly in countries that have experienced a form of language and/or script revolution. For every Turkish writer there is the possibility of using an Ottoman-flaired Turkish, and a republican Turkish that has shed its Arabic and religious terminology. This paper looks at how Orhan Pamuk and Elif Shafak engage with this choice of Ottoman Turkish and/or Republican Turkish for their books. The republican project encouraged the use of pure Turkish, devoid of all the Arabic and Persian words that the language had acquired throughout centuries during the Ottoman period. In that sense Ottoman Turkish represented an Islamic language, while Republican Turkish, with its nationalist undertones, represented an 'Enlightenment' European one. Both Pamuk and Shafak are self-aware of this choice between Ottoman and Turkish words and share with the reader how they have decided to use the language both in their novels and autobiographical narratives. As this is a very extensive topic, in this paper I will limit myself to these two writer's approach to language as attested by their metafictional narratives and will focus on two words that reveal this Islamic-republican rift. These words are Orhan Pamuk's *hüzün* and Elif Şafak's *palas*. These words, as you can imagine, are not mere words but bring with them a whole system of meaning and epistemology which I'll try to detail here.

When talking about such famous authors like Pamuk and Shafak and choosing a language, one could easily talk about the choice of using English or Turkish for the ever widening readership these two authors are reaching. Having been educated and brought up in several different countries, it appears of the two writers Shafak is the one who is now and again tempted to write in English, as has been the case with her latest novel 'Honour', which has been translated into Turkish as 'İskender', after one of the main characters of the novel. While the title 'Honour' carries a multicultural cache in the international bookmarket, I suppose in Turkish it would only point to a sense of provincialism, as such titles are common enough for films and novels set in rural parts of Turkey. Be that as it may, for Shafak, writing in English is a temptation that has proven too strong, we have yet to see Pamuk write in a language other than Turkish. However, certain other criticism has been leveled at Pamuk. Hilmi Yavuz, a doyen of Turkish letters, states that Pamuk has sacrificed his literary talent to the dictates of his agent in the United States, who wants Pamuk to write 'oriental' novels(54). And basically use 'orientalist' language which involves explaining Turkish terms to an international audience, which does include the Turks themselves.

However, the topic of this paper is to do with choices when they do write in Turkish. The changes in Turkish culture and language were a favourite topic with these writers even before they shot to international fame.¹ Both writers come from the class of republican elites and yet have a revisionist view of history. So in a way this paper about is about the choice of discourse -Muslim or republican- as much as a choice of languages – middle eastern or european.

¹ Many more languages than I reckoned with and I'll fall into the trap of talking about discourses rather than languages but that is what certain discourses do- act on a level/par with languages.

Shafak in particular has been trying to forge her own legitimacy, by attempting to create a third space between the Islamic and republican epistemologies that are prevalent in Turkey, and she consolidates this third space with her actions both as a private individual and intellectual. She makes silenced histories, and drawing their genealogies one of her primary concerns. As a Turkish intellectual, she is equally interested in the inaccessibility of the past after the Turkish culture and alphabet revolution of the 1920's. She is also aware of responsibility this lays on the shoulders of authors who more often than not take it upon themselves to be the genealogists that the modern Turkish state both needs and resists.

Elif Shafak's entry into the Turkish literary scene came with her 1998 novel *Pinhan*. The subject matter of the novel was a hermaphrodite at the center of a sufi circle, and it won her not only the Mawlana Great Prize but also a small cluster of fans who liked metaphysical and heterodoxical stories. Her novel *Mahrem* which came in 2000 was also awarded a prize and she wrote her 2004 novel *Saint of Incipient Sanities* in the English language. Just as the literary elites were discussing whether she should at all be considered within the Turkish literary scene,² she married the columnist Eyüp Can, which in her words surprised both her acquaintances from her republican background, and her feminist followers who had seen in her the model of the single successful woman. However, this move to marry Can, who comes from a religious background and is a columnist in a religious leaning newspaper, came as no surprise to those who had already recognized the mystical leanings in her writing. To them, she had now found a solid basis for the metaphysical elements and **sufi metaphors** that she had been using in her work from the very beginning.³

History does not start with 1923 (founding of the republic) in Turkey: when you say that, you are at once stamped with conservatism. Because, if you are secular, that means you have no ties with religion. There are camps, either this or that. I believe in the necessity of creating a third way in Turkey. A synthesis. For a start, we must have curiosity for, for instance, who lies buried in the tomb that we have just passed by, what kind of a story took place at this corner of the town at a particular time period. And the feeling of empathy, in order to feel other lives, the pains of others. I believe there must be a way to bring the left and sufism together.

The news-quality of Shafak's choice in spouse would be over-shadowed by a greater breach of confidence when in 2006 she wrote *The Bastard of Istanbul*, which makes references to the Armenian deportations of 1915.⁴ Even before this novel Shafak had been very much interested about the amnesia of the Turks when it came to their

² Who is considered a 'Turkish author' worthy to be translated. Yıldız Ramazanoğlu's observation of the two camps not speaking at all in 2013 London Bookfair

³ As Shafak herself has said in an interview about her marriage:

We come from different ideological climates. He comes from a more conservative background, and I from the left. However, my mind is very open to sufism. That's why many people do not know how to place me. We have many things in common with Eyüp, we have common questions, although our answers may not always be the same... most important of all, we respect each other's differences. I believe that the greatest danger in marriages is that when the other half is different, to try to make him or her be like us.

Indeed, it's not only her critics but also herself who see her marriage as a metaphor for the meeting of leftist and conservative intellectual streaks in Turkey. She says her marriage has been possible through her openness towards sufism, something she goes onto recommended to other leftist intellectuals in Turkey:

⁴ But even before it got there, Shafak had been saluting the lost multicultural past of Istanbul, and Armenians especially. Her novel "Flea Palace" opens with a scene where two cemeteries, one Turkish the other Armenian, are to be razed to the ground due to the building of a new road.

Ottoman history, and not just concerning Armenians but also their own way of life and even language. In a column she used the Armenian issue as a leadway into the much larger project of forgetting that the Turks have been involved with since the founding of the Republic, and which, in her opinion needs to be acknowledged, mourned and indeed counteracted by Turkish intellectuals:

What do we know about the non-Muslim intellectuals who lived and wrote in the final period of the Ottomans? How many of us can name a few Armenian authors or thinkers? Aren't we a little interested in what the Armenians, who began to use the printing press much earlier than the rest of the nations in the Ottoman state, wrote about and read? Of course we aren't. Similar to the way we have no interest in what happened in the past, what is written in Ottoman inscriptions, our family stories about centuries past or **the gradual removal of Ottoman words** from our shrinking vocabulary. I mourn even those words. How can a person not mourn one's own life?

Naturally, Pamuk is well informed of the republican project of getting rid of Arabic script and words and he has spoken about this metaphorically in many novels. Here's a passage from his novel *White Castle* which an Ottoman scientist imagines what it would be like for the Ottomans to adopt a different life-style:

Did we understand 'defeat' to mean that the empire would lose all of its territories one by one? [...] Or did defeat mean that people would change and alter their beliefs without noticing it? We imagined how everyone in Istanbul might rise from their warm beds one morning as changed people; they wouldn't know how to wear their clothes, wouldn't be able to remember what minarets were for. Or perhaps defeat meant to accept the superiority of others and try to emulate them: then he would recount some episode from my life in Venice, and we would imagine how acquaintances of ours here would act out my experiences dressed up with foreign hats on their heads and pants on their legs. (*WC*, 96)

While this passage points to the cultural revolution, the fictional introduction of the book makes a more overt reference to the alphabet revolution. We are told that the fictional 'editor' of the book found the manuscript written in Ottoman script in an attic, and has transcribed it to modern Turkish to the best of his ability.⁵

A professor friend, returning the manuscript he'd thumbed through at my insistence, said that in the old wooden houses on the back streets of Istanbul there were thousands of manuscripts filled with stories of this kind. If the simple people living in those houses hadn't mistaken them, with their old Ottoman script, for Arabic Korans

⁵ *The White Castle* opens with a preface by the novel's fictional editor Faruk Darvinoğlu, who claims to have found the story we are about to read in Ottoman-Arabic script in some archive and to have transcribed it for the modern Turkish reader. Faruk is a figure that the Pamuk reader knows from a previous novel, *Sessiz Ev* (The Quiet House) (1983). Literature critic and an eminent professor of English, Jale Parla describes *Sessiz Ev* as: "haunted by the memories and actually, the memoirs of [...] one of those Turkish pioneers of westernization [Faruk's encyclopedist grandfather] who believed they could single-handedly bring about an epistemological revolution."⁵ Faruk, as revealed in the fictional preface, seems to have similar aspirations as his grandfather and from the very start, the question of whose story we are about to read is blurred: Is what we have in our hands the orientalist conjectures of an Italian slave, the chronicles of the scholarly enterprises of the Hoja or the story of Faruk who wants to add an interesting entry to his grandfather's encyclopaedia? Each of these stories vies for centrality, and the whole introduction prepares the ground for a novel which will be presented through embedded narratives.⁵

and kept them in a place of honor high up on top of their cupboards, they were probably ripping them up page by page to light their stoves. (WC, 3)

By stressing that a whole literature and historiography was lost to generations of post-republic Turks, through the alphabet reform Pamuk sketches a Turkish brand of inaccessibility of the past. Thus, we are led to gather that due to this linguistic rupture, The alphabet and language revolution as one of the cultural revolutions carried out by Atatürk and his party in a move to distance all that had been deemed to be oppressive in the Ottoman Empire. The alphabet reform of 1928 rendered Turks who could read and write illiterate overnight. By stressing that a whole literature and historiography was lost to generations of post-republic Turks, Shafak underlines the inaccessibility of the past and raises a call to arms for writers to engage with this inaccessibility. A consistent disinterest in Ottoman inscriptions and words written and preserved in this lost alphabet leads, as Shafak underlines, to a total disregard for what Ottoman life was like- including its multicultural aspects. Thus, a historiographical black hole opens up that needs to be filled with narratives, and Shafak offers herself for the job. She says that her fiction is like:

walking on a pile of rubble left behind after a catastrophe. I walk slowly so that I can hear if there is still someone or something breathing underneath. I listen attentively to the sounds coming from below to see if anyone, any story or cultural legacy from the past, is still alive under the rubble. If and when I come across signs of life, I dig deep and pull it up, above the ground, shake its dust, and put it in my novels so that it can survive. As a writer who happens to be a woman and attached to Islamic, as well as Jewish and Christian heterodox mysticism, I reject the rationalised, disenchanted, centralised, **Turkified modern language** put in front of me," she declares. Today in Turkey, language is polarised and politicised. Depending on the ideological camp you are attached to, for example Kemalists versus Islamists, you can use either an 'old' or a 'new' set of words.

Both Pamuk and Shafak are well aware of these two sets of words, and rather than choose one or the other they constantly expose the tension between to add depth to their narratives. Accordingly, they make much of the concepts that are central to their stories and acquaint the reader with the genealogy of these words.

One of these words, for Pamuk, is *hüzün*, a word that has already been a topic of discussion in international literary circles with its undertones of nostalgia for the empire, or what that empire brought to the capital. However, less attention has been paid to the way in which Pamuk⁶ contextualizes and reveals the origin of the word and how it entered Turkish. We must appreciate how a word like *hüzün*, hankering after old times would be anathema for the republican elites, for the elites claimed that there was nothing good to be nostalgic about in the Ottoman empire, and everything good lay in the republican futures – all this opposition without acknowledging that it is an Arabic word and has a rather Islamic context. He is so interested in this word that is hardly ever used by republicans that he devotes an entire chapter to it as a concept:

'Hüzün, the Turkish word for melancholy, has an Arabic root; when it appears in the Koran (as "*huzn*" in two verses and "*hazen*" in three others) it means much the same thing as the contemporary Turkish

⁶ Any piece of writing that deals with the Ottoman period is always perceived as partisan, either pro-Ottoman or pro-Republic and *The White Castle* (1985) can hardly escape such investigation, **HISTORICAL NOVELS**

word.' Orhan Pamuk, *Istanbul: Memoirs of a City*, trans. by Maureen Freely (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p.81.⁷ The prophet Muhammed referred to the year in which he lost both his wife Hatice and his uncle Ebu Talip as Sennetül Huzn, or the year of melancholy; this confirms that the word is meant to convey a feeling of deep spiritual loss. [...]

84 But what I am trying to describe now is not the melancholy of Istanbul, but the hüziin in which we see ourselves reflected, the hüziin we absorb with pride and share as a community.[...] I am speaking of the evenings when the sun sets early, of the fathers under the street lamps in the backstreets returning home carrying plastic bags [...] of ship's horns booming through the fog; of the city walls, ruins since the end of the 85 Byzantine Empire; of the markets that empty in the evenings; of the dervish lodges, the tekkes, that have crumbled, of seagulls... (and it goes on)

The primary reason for republican dismissal of the word is that it has Arabic and indeed Islamic roots, but also it speaks of loss and better days, and for the republic the better days are always ahead and there's nothing to be nostalgic about in the past. As can be seen in the above quote, this sense of loss of and aspirations towards former glory is one that unites Istanbulis of every ilk, and Pamuk's novel is generally devoted to explaining this feeling in all its manifestations.

In Şafak's description of Istanbul, all the city's hüziin has been concentrated in Bonbon Palas,⁸ a dilapidated apartment block. Although Şafak is the one who advocates Sufism and concomitant Arabic words compared to Pamuk's lapsed republicanism, I want to draw attention to a European word of Latin origin, and what it comes to mean in the Turkish context. The word is Palas of the Bonbon Palas, the Turkish version of the French word Palais, French being the European language that Turkish borrowed most freely from, not only during republican but also Ottoman times- clearly the second word of the title Bonbon is also French.

The categorical name Palas was given to the stone apartment blocks built during the republic, in opposition to the wooden houses of old Istanbul. As inventions of a new age, this was the name given to apartment blocks in the 1930s to evoke a sense of opulence, which indeed these blocks seemed to have in their heyday. They were homes for the republican ruling elites and thus could not be called 'serails' as that would smack too much of the Ottoman period. These 'palas'/palais would usually have names like 'Ankara'⁹ or 'Cumhuriyet' in order not to leave any doubt as to the political leanings of the people who lived in them. However, as one usually finds in the trajectory of such politically charged words, the word Palas rather quickly lost its luster. With the advent of new electrical and plumbing amenities in the following decades, these "palaces" of the Republic were themselves abandoned, like the abandoned "real" palaces of the Ottomans. These beacons of modernity fell into

⁷ (6)

⁸ early 13c., "official residence of an emperor, king, archbishop, etc.," from Old French *palais* "palace, court," from Medieval Latin *palacium* "a palace" (source of Spanish *palacio*, Italian *palazzo*), from Latin *palatium* "the Palatine hill," in plural, "a palace," from *Mons Palatinus* "the Palatine Hill," one of the seven hills of ancient Rome, where Augustus Caesar's house stood (the original "palace"), later the site of the splendid residence built by Nero. In English, the general sense of "splendid dwelling place" is from late 14c.

The hill name probably is ultimately from *palus* "stake," on the notion of "enclosure." Another guess is that it is from Etruscan and connected with *Pales*, supposed name of an Italic goddess of shepherds and cattle.

⁹ Built on a Turkish cemetery, Gümüşsuyu

disrepair and became cheap accommodation for all sorts of city dwellers, particularly those newly arrived from the rural areas of Turkey,¹⁰ a theme she treats in the novel.

Thus, with strategic choice of Arabic or European words, the two writers conjure up a whole history of the country and epistemological transformations. *Hüzün*, an Arabic word, is presented as deeply felt by almost all inhabitants of Istanbul, and is defined as a love for nostalgia Turks cannot rid themselves of despite the promises of the republican future. It is a word that persists in some Turkish texts, but more so as a concept, as a discourse in the Turkish psyche. Shafak would be one of the first people to give *hüzün* its due, however, she also exposes what the new borrowed words do in terms of meaning and context to a story. Her use of *Palas* is thick with layers of meaning, the very kind of historical layers that she is keen to investigate, as is revealed in her interview. Thus, both writers create a linguistic path over the rubble that is Ottoman Turkish and ask the Turkish reader to contemplate the tensions inherent in the very language they now speak.

¹⁰ With its motley crew of inhabitants whose name plates are given at the very first page, it is clear that Şafak is trying to invoke the multi-religious and multicultural community of Istanbul of the 1930s and before. One (dys-functional) family living in Bonbon Palasare Musa (Moses) and Meryem (Mary) and their timid son Muhammed. As part of Istanbul, sharing its dilapidated state, Bonbon Palace metonymically stands for Istanbul, and when the narrator identifies with the apartment block, he is in fact identifying with Istanbul, in a manner reminiscent of Pamuk identifying himself with Istanbul in his autobiographical book:

Their [Conrad, Nabokov, Naipaul] imaginations were fed by exile, a nourishment drawn not through roots but through rootlessness; mine, however, requires that I stay in the same city, on the same street, in the same house, gazing at the same view. Istanbul's fate is my fate: I am attached to this city because it has made me who I am. ... The city into which I was born was poorer, shabbier, and more isolated than it had ever been in its two-thousand-year history. For me it has always been a city of ruins and of an end-of-empire melancholy. I've spent my life either battling with this melancholy, or (like all Istanbulis) making it my own.

So isolation of Istanbul as Pamuk was growing up expressed in the terms of *hüzün* and the palaces that mix the old with the new both linguistically, and with regard to the different classes of people who make Istanbul their home in Şafak's novel, show us how the choice of a word, with its concomitant discourse and/or language, can contain a whole history of a town or indeed a country.