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THE IDEOLOGY OF WESTERNISATION AND THE FAILURE OF THE TURKISH INTELLECTUAL IN THE MARCH TWELFTH NOVELS

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Abstract

This article seeks to examine the reason why the March Twelfth novels, written in the decade following the 1971 military intervention, are predominantly read through critical frameworks of Western European literary and philosophical analysis. I will demonstrate that, from its inception, the Turkish novel was hugely influenced by the European literary tradition reflecting the, at times uneasy, relationship between the development of the Turkish state as a whole and the political and cultural evolutions of the West. I will stress that the relationship occurs at a strictly intellectual level: the March Twelfth novelists are open to the ideas of Western culture but quick to condemn what they see as its more decadent elements, just as the Tanzimat and early Republican novels did. In conclusion, I will argue that in the aftermath of March Twelfth, writers acknowledged the Western influence as the cause for the left's failure to communicate its message to the masses.

Key Words: Westernisation, Leftist, Failure, Mass, Military Intervention, March Twelfth Novels.

Introduction

The 'March Twelfth novelists' is a term coined by critics and used to describe authors who wrote political novels in the decade following the March 12th military intervention in response to the military takeover and subsequent oppression of the Turkish left in the so-called 'sledgehammer operation.' In brief, the novels are thematically linked by showing the conflict between various factions in the fallout of the coup; by documenting the abuses carried out by the state upon members of the left; and by assessing the failure of the intellectual left to reach out to the masses and bring about change.

It is important to note that these authors were not consciously writing as part of this group; indeed, some March Twelfth novelists have sought to reject such a label in an effort to prevent their texts from being seen only as didactic political tracts. However, all of the authors now referred to as March Twelfth novelists can be

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categorised as belonging to a particular section of Turkish society - namely, the intellectual left – and, moreover, can be shown to be writing with that social group as the primary intended readership. Such a categorisation is as important for those it does not include as much those it does. Obviously, the rural and peasant classes are not part of the intellectual left; they are not student activists, they cannot read the theoretical works of Marx and Hegel, and indeed they will not be able to read the March Twelfth novels. This exclusion is actually caused by the relationship between the leftist intellectuals and another group excluded from their milieu, namely the bourgeoisie class, the social group containing their parents, the first generation Kemalist supporters. This generation was also made up of intellectual reformers who saw it as their mission to enlighten the nation of Turkey, and their children, with Western politics and culture, what Schick calls the “official ideology of Atatürkist nationalism.” (Schick, 1987: 155) However, by the time of the 1971 coup, this group was middle-aged, happy with its status amongst the cultured elite, and conservative in its attitude to reform. Not only does this account for the frequent intergenerational conflicts within the March Twelfth novels, it also shows that the March Twelfth authors and their intended readers were brought up in an intellectual tradition which prized Western politics, culture, and literature above all else.

Such an education becomes a double-edged sword for the March Twelfth novelists: they are educated well enough to react against the perceived injustices of capitalism and elitism but this very education distances them from the victims of such injustice, the mass Turkish populace. This failure is linked, throughout the March Twelfth novels, with the overall failure of the left wing intellectual movement: the novelists introduce characters from impoverished and rural backgrounds to criticise the intellectual characters in the novel. In Erdal Öz's *Yaralısın*, for instance, one of the 'Nuri', the common prisoners, tells the unnamed protagonist, “You claim to undertake a fight on behalf of the people, without understanding their needs and wishes.” (Öz, 1975: 185) Despite knowing this, however, the March Twelfth novelists still write to an audience of leftist intellectuals exclusively, referring to writers, thinkers, and ideologies from the West as if such figures are commonly known. As Çetin Altan's central protagonist in *Büyük Gözaltı*, 'The Great Surveillance' (1972) is being tortured he recalls the names of Georges Jacques Danton and Andre de Chenier, two prominent figures in the French revolution who were guillotined for their dissent. In a similar situation, Füzün's protagonist in *Kırk Yedi'liler*, 'The Generation of '47' (1974), Emine, recalls a litany of names to try and contextualise, and thus lessen, her suffering under torture:

Think calmly; do not let them get to you. They are of secondary importance.
Ok. Let's begin. Vietnam, yes. Palestine, yes. The Spanish Civil War, yes.
And Algerian too, yes. The French paratroopers, yes. Greece, yes. Mustafa
Suphi, yes. Babi Yar, yes. Sacco and Vanzetti, yes. Lumumba, yes. Oh so
much. Think of those close to you. (Füzün, 1974: 358-9)

In reciting these names, causes, and events associated with oppression and struggle, Emine is able to calm herself down as they all contribute her own definition as a leftist intellectual revolutionary and her cause. However, it is profoundly revealing that all of the names, causes, and events are from outside Turkey, bar only one, Mustafa Suphi, an early leader of the Turkish communist movement. The majority of the causes are from Western Europe and even those that aren't, namely Vietnam and Palestine, have strong connotations with the student movements of Western Europe and America. This is highly indicative of the left wing intelligentsia in Turkey who,

through their high level of learning, are able to understand the problems of poverty and oppression, but, by virtue of the same learning, are unable to communicate these ideas to the people they affect, the workers and peasant class.

At the same time, the March Twelfth novels are full of left wing intellectual characters that are quick to virulently condemn examples of what they see as Western decadence. For instance, in Adalet Ağaoğlu's, *Bir Düşün Gecesi*, 'The Wedding Party' (1976), Ayşen attacks her mother for betraying the signs of Western capitalism: "You smell of hairdye. You smell of nail polish. You smell of makeup foundation. You smell of rich baths and massages. You smell of gold and diamond." In similar terms, the narrator of *Kırk Yedi'liler* criticises Emine's mother, Nüveyre: "she had shopped at all of Ankara's most famous American shops." There is a similarly different attitude shown by leftist intellectuals towards Turkish citizens who move to the West. Emine, for instance, sees the only hope for the Turkish nation in characters like Kurban who is moving to Germany in order to work and learn. At the same time, she is strongly critical of her brother Kubilay for wanting to study in Washington. Likewise, Tuncer, in *Bir Düşün Gecesi*, is looked upon with scorn by his former left wing compatriots for settling in middle class comfort in Lausanne rather than continuing fighting for the left wing cause in Turkey.

In such a way, we can see the double-edged attitude towards Western influence held by the Turkish intellectual left, the authors and readership of the March Twelfth novels. On the one hand, they applaud the secular socialism of Western intellectuals and admire attempts made by European nations throughout history to overthrow oppressive regimes; on the other, they are deeply concerned about the corrosive quality of the capitalism which was at the heart of all Western European governments and, in particular, the USA. Such an attitude during the 1960s and 70s was, in fact, firmly in line with the opinion of left wing and student movements across Europe and was, of course, official policy in the Soviet block and in Maoist China. The Vietnam protests in America, the 1968 student riots in Paris, the rise of militant communism in South America, and countless other political and cultural movements, were all part of a broad counter-culture which rejected the traditional normative values of the ruling, capitalist elite.

There are several important reasons why the Turkish left wing movement was different from those of Western Europe and the US, however. First of these is that, whereas student movements in the US, the UK, and France, for instance, were engaging with and reacting against governments and social systems which had been in place for hundreds of years, the Turkish leftist intellectuals were operating in a system which was very new. Though the years of Atatürk and the Kemalist reforms worked towards Westernisation and secularism, Turkey arguably only became a true capitalist democracy following the 1961 Constitution. A student activist in France might have sought to overthrow the ruling, capitalist system; for a Turkish student in the 1960s, however, it seemed more like the Turkish nation had a choice *between* either the capitalist systems of Western Europe or a new political model developed along socialist lines. Secondly, left wing intellectuals in 1960s Turkey were not operating within a literary and social context in which political dissent and free expression had been part of the cultural fabric. Inevitably then, when placed in a position where objection to the conservative elite was possible and expression for socialist and communist rhetoric became necessary for Turkish thinkers, ideas, texts, and indeed

entire political systems had to be imported from Western Europe where such things had been possible for centuries. This is the true source of conflict within the March Twelfth novels: the intellectual left import Western concepts to explain the plight of the impoverished and oppressed Turkish masses, but lack the ability to translate such concepts into a context the masses understand, leaving them, to quote Aysel in *Lying Down to Die*, "reciting aphorisms". (Ağaoğlu, 2006: 268)

It can be seen, then, that the political situation in 1960s Turkey, the conflict between bourgeoisie capitalism and intellectual socialism, represented in microcosm the broad global debates of the period. This relationship, one in which the Turkish state acted almost as a testing ground for the cultural, literary, and political ideas of the rest of the world, and Western Europe in particular, began in the declining years of the Ottoman Empire. The left wing intellectuals, and the novelists in particular, however much they knew it alienated them from the rural masses, were inevitably part of this inherited tradition of Western influence. It is worth briefly tracing the influence of Western European culture on Turkey from this point up to 1971, before going on to examine the role of Western literature and theories in the March Twelfth novels particularly.

However, for the sake of convenience I will concisely summarise the argument. Since its earliest examples, the novel as a genre naturally depicts the views and lifestyles of people. However, a distinction can clearly be drawn between those novels which convey a political message implicitly or explicitly. The explicitly 'political novel' became a popular genre in nineteenth century Europe with novelists such as Charles Dickens, Honoré de *Balzac*, and Feodor Dostoevsky, using it to criticise and comment upon social injustices.¹ Across the twentieth century, the political novel has become a more central part of the novel genre with writers such as Joseph Conrad, John Steinbeck, John Dos Passos, Andre Malraux, Arthur Koestler, George Orwell, and Gabriel Garcia Marquez increasing the level of social criticism in their novels as well as refining the ways in which political and historical issues could be dealt with in a fictional environment.

In Turkish literature, the novel appeared as a genre in the late nineteenth century. Western political novel relied on the lives of bourgeoisie characters for the subject of narration; however, since, an autonomous national Muslim bourgeoisie was non-existent in the Ottoman Empire, the Turkish novel began as an imitative, translated form of narrative imported and used by a small minority of the western-educated intelligentsia. These intellectuals were part of a new class of Muslim Turks emerging as part of a civil service expansion intended to execute much needed reform within the empire. The state trained this new class of bureaucrats to serve in the diplomatic corps, whereas previously Christian dragomans had been used as intermediaries in dealings with Western states. This training included tuition in Western languages, primarily French, at the *Tercüme Odası* (Translation Office) opened in 1833. Consequently, there was inside government an educated group of Muslim Turks in contact with Western political ideas, who had a broad awareness of European languages and literature. This group added to the ranks of Muslim Turks, the graduates of the Empire's medical schools and military academies where French was the *lingua franca*, who were already well acquainted with Western culture. Out of this

¹ Whilst Balzac was, in his personal views, a conservative Royalist, his keen insight regarding working class conditions earned him the esteem of many Socialists and Marxists.

new socio-political class grew a highly skilled group of Ottoman reformers who looked to the West as the source for political and technological reform. Because of the literary nature of their education, the Turkish novel played a vital role in their attempts to synthesise contemporary Western culture with traditional Islamic and Ottoman ideals. As Fethi Naci argues, the novel form was introduced to Turkish society as a modernising device and thus issues pertaining to westernisation became of primary importance to Turkish novelists and literary figures. (Naci, 1983: 611) It is unsurprising then, that the best examples of the attitudes of the Turkish intellectual towards the West can be found in the poetry and prose of the late Ottoman age. For instance, Ziya Pasha, a leading Ottoman poet and politician wrote:

“I passed through the land of infidels, I saw cities and mansions;

I wandered in the realm of Islam, I saw nothing but ruins.” (Lewis, 1968: 124)

Not long after this, Sinasi, another Ottoman writer, called Mustafa Reshit Pasha, the representation of Westernisation attempts, in deliberately provocative religious language, the “prophet of civilisation.” (Sevük, 1942: 33) With the eventual establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 and the promotion of Westernisation to the position of ultimate state policy, (Akser, 1999: 15) it is notable to mark the poeticism and intellectualism of Mustafa Kemal’s pro-Western rhetoric:

It is futile to try to resist the thunderous advance of civilisation, for it has no pity on those who are ignorant and rebellious. [...] When faced with this, those nations who try to follow the superstitions of the Middle Ages are condemned to be destroyed or at least to become enslaved and debased. (Kasaba, 1997: 26)

Clearly in Atatürk’s view, a view which as we will come to see heavily informs the views of the leftist intellectuals in the period leading up to the 1971 coup, the world is split into those who support Westernisation and those who are ‘ignorant’. Kemalism, as an ideology, and the later intellectual left wing political activists who followed on in the 1960s, stated their intentions to work for the people of Turkey, to educate in Western, secular thinking and to develop Turkish society as a whole. In nearly all of the March Twelfth novels, the main left wing characters are all shown to sympathise with the weak and underprivileged members of the working class. Their first encounter usually happens in childhood. For instance, in *Yarın Yarın* (1976), Selim describes how:

Even as a child, I would pity the poor, the workers, the beggars, or the salesmen I saw on the street [...] I started to pity those who had to steal and so on. I would be equally ashamed with a friend who was scolded, would be terrified with the thief who was caught, or would feel cold with those kids that walked barefoot in the street. (Kür, 1976: 185)

Importantly, this feeling of sympathy is in place before the character becomes ‘intellectual’; however, it is only through the process of intellectualisation that the characters are able to enunciate their compassion and fully understand the mechanisms of oppression. In such a way, the left wing intellectuals create a division between ‘insiders’, themselves, and ‘outsiders’, the people at large. We can see such a trait in a conversation between Emine’s revolutionary friends, Melek and Nedim:

Nedim: And you Melek, why are you studying economics while you can paint exceptionally good pictures?

Melek: I don't believe in painting, Nedim. I cannot reach the public through paintings.

Nedim: Thus, you mean to say our people cannot appreciate art or intelligence, don't you see? [...] You imply that our people only understand what is roughly put. (Füruzan, 1976: 158-9)

Melek feels she must study economics instead of art, despite the fact she has a natural talent for painting, because she cannot reach the masses by drawing pictures. Nedim shows this up to be an example of the intellectual underestimating the 'people' as uncultured and ignorant. At the same time, however, Nedim idealises the people, viewing them as righteous 'intellectuals-in-waiting', ready to be saved by the revolutionaries. Both views alienate the people by not engaging with the masses on their own terms. In *Bir Düğün Gecesi*, Tezel illustrates the latter by recalling how one of her revolutionary friends was rebuffed by a taxi driver:

Revolutionary: They never get out of the cabs and always make a fuss over our cabbies: My friend, you are a labourer, get up and fight against the ones that rule over you! [...]

Cabby: Who the hell are you anyway?

Revolutionary: I am a revolutionary, my man!

Cabby: You scum, you are the cause of all our problems. You make boycotts, protests and our customers run away. We've had enough of you! Leave us alone! (Ağaoğlu, 1984: 76-7)

Far from being excited and moved by the revolutionary's rhetoric, he demonstrates that the actions of revolutionaries harm his business by driving away customers. For the taxi driver, high-minded talk of revolution is much less of a concern than the day-to-day business of earning a living.

Whilst the division between intellectual thinkers and mass populations, particularly in a literary context, is well documented, (Carey, 1992) in Turkish society the division is further entrenched by the very fact of Western influence: the Turkish revolutionary intellectual sympathises wants to fight against the ruling system but must do so using the jargon of a non-native ideology which alienates him or her from the very masses he seeks to help. The entire conceptualisation of the leftist revolution is through the discourse of Westernised socialism focused on fair income distribution, secularism, and extremely theoretical opinions of nationalism and unity. We can see such language being employed in a speech by Güner in Tarık Dursun's *Gün Döndü*:

Our aims are as follows: to realise social justice within the borders of our National Pact, keeping the unity of national principle, to establish a democracy through radical moves, to reach contemporary civilisation, that is a civilisation without exploitation [...] Republicanism is the primary principle, nationalism is our foundation, etatism is the method for development, secularism is complementary for the Republic, and populism is its irreplaceable method. (Dursun, 1974: 123)

The end of this speech, with its appeal to populism, is almost comic after the long list of complicated theoretical principles establishing the aims of the movement; and whilst the motivation of the speech may be principled and positive, it is sorely lacking in any practical application. In several of the March Twelfth novels, the authors, accepting the failure of the intellectual left in communicating their message to

the masses, demonstrate the rural peasant's view of such rhetoric. For instance, in *47'liler* Füzuzan presents Leylim Nine, an uneducated peasant, commenting on the urban intellectual as the figure of rural wisdom:

Those urban people aren't like us at all. Everything about them is different; their faces even. Especially those who are educated are greater and unreachable. This is what I've heard: they ornate their lives, I was told. Even getting pregnant is based on calculations. [...] I'm very well aware of it. Our blood is different to theirs. (Füzuzan, 1976: 54)

Leylim's assertion of radical difference between the common people and the urban intellectuals is a deliberate inversion of the portrayal of the 'noble savage' in the works of so-called 'Village Novelists' such as Talip Apaydın , Kemal Bilbaşar, Mahmut Makal, Mehmet Başaran and Fakir Baykurt. In the works of these authors, intended at least in part as pro-Kemalist tracts on how the intellectual should engage with and educate the masses, there are repeated instances of intellectuals meeting with 'savages' in order that they might both learn from each other. In the pessimistic March Twelfth novels, however, there is no meeting of minds: the rural peasants view the intellectuals as calculating, alien, foreigners who, rather than help the peasants, only end up causing trouble and problems.

Conclusion

Though the March Twelfth novels all, to a lesser or greater extent, elaborate on a historical moment, they, like the political period they describe, are the inexorable product of all that has gone before. Over the course of the century prior to March 12th 1971, the Turkish elite imported Western politics, social conventions, and cultural discourses; likewise, the novelists and novel-reading classes, the very same elites, took their influence from the Western literary tradition. The Western political ideas, both capitalist and socialist, exploited and alienated the rural Turkish masses who remained uneducated, conservative, and superstitiously religious: thus, the March Twelfth novels, variously self-conscious of their own literary and intellectual nature, inevitably present the failure of the leftist intellectual movement in terms of Westernised characters and concepts being unable to convince the masses.

It is no coincidence that the other major theme in the March Twelfth novels is imprisonment: not only was the prison a literal reality for the left wing novelists and their readership after the coup, it also provided an environment in which the intellectual is stripped of his or her Westernised intellect and is forced to properly communicate with common people and thus, as Foucault claims, the prison acts like a place of enforced self-education. (Foucault, 1975: 29) In Öz's *Yaralısın*, the anonymous revolutionary prisoner talks to several prisoners; one of them comments on the difference between the two types of prisoners, common and political:

You commit crimes by reading, we do not. If we had your knowledge and you had our good manners, you can't imagine what a perfect blend it would be. Then neither would you have been put in prison, nor we. We wouldn't get together. They wouldn't let it happen. We get together only in damp prisons. We shall grieve not, but rather have faith that even this is a beginning. (Öz, 1975: 155)

In a positive way, the prisoner sets out the ontological debate between theory and practise: the common prisoner acknowledges that he lacks the text-based knowledge necessary to improve his situation; the intellectual lacks the ability to coherently communicate his own knowledge to the common man. Interestingly, the common prisoner blames the anonymous authorities – ‘They’ – suggesting that the division is created artificially in the way the intellectuals are taught, in order to control the weak and uniformed.

For the majority of the leftist intellectual characters portrayed in the March Twelfth novels, the period after the coup is a time of extreme dejection and hopelessness. Each of them realises that the intellectuals were mistaken in trying to impose Western socialist theories on the Turkish nation without the comprehension of the masses. As we see in *Safak*, Oya loses her confidence in the cause entirely:

Our people? Calling Ali one of our *people*? Beginning your sentence with the word ‘people’? What right do you have to use the word? You were in trouble with the police for a stupid reason. What were you doing in Ali’s house? Educating *our people*? After all, it wasn’t the place for it. Moreover, our people won’t become conscious of their fate from the words of some women who lose their way because of loneliness, like us. (Soysal, 1975: 83)

Oya rejects any ability to speak for the ‘people’; her trust in herself and her cause is gone because she understands that its basis is in a foreign language. Following the coup, revolutionary intellectuals see the reasons for their failure: the masses are uniformed and cannot communicate with the intellectuals because of their westernised jargon. In the March Twelfth novels, the intellectual faces up to the dilemma of western education: they are made aware of the world beyond themselves and have advanced, complex theories of how to achieve fairness in Turkey. However, their views are based on theories formed outside the country not on observations made within it. The language of the intellectual, therefore, becomes technical and conceptual, and remains alien to the people at large.

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