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Traditional Discourse : Individual and Society in the Early XIXth Century Pre-Ottoman-Turkish Novels

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Oral culture is spoken rather than written. It is a feature of human-mind and memory. By means of oral culture, information is preserved in the society's and individual's memory. By the help of this feature, it connects all people. It is natural, active and traditional. Oral culture has a very long life. It has strong connections with perception by hearing and observance of the movements of the body; because story-teller's facial expressions, non-verbal communication, arm movements or the tone of voice combines with audience's reactions. It calls out the 'real' audience and it is formalised by the audience. Oral culture's products are very rhythmic; because it has got some word-patterns and repetitions. However, oral culture does not provide any details or analysis on the characters of people or on their individual and social lives (Ong 1995).

As opposed to the above general characteristics of oral culture, written culture's products are texts. Besides, to write something down as a text requires the technology. Because according to Ong (1995), writing is itself a technology and it is an artificial (man-made) thing. Written culture isolates people from each other because the text is autistic and passive and it calls out an 'imaginary' group. It is not like the 'real' audience. Besides, the communication in between the author and the reader can be set up the communication by visual perception. However, in the text, the writer himself is more important than the teller himself. Writing gives way to individual creativity. It sets the creator (author) of the text free in expressing

thought. So the written text is detailed, analytic and argumentative. It is quite different from the word-patterns and repetitions. In written culture, the individual and society live in the text(Ong 1995).

In the oral narrative, there are three main characters: The narrator(teller), the audience and the hero.

The narrator hands down the tradition from one generation to another. He/she refreshes the society's memory and he/she depends on the audience. The audience formalises the narrative. The hero symbolises the ideals, expectations and traditions of the audience. In this situation, audience is the society and hero is the individual.

Oral culture's individual is an exaggerated hero! His reactions are physical and so impressive. There is no place for indistinctness in the narrative. Hero is open to real life and he is so natural. He combines past, present and future. He is traditional and also ideal.

In Islamic-Turkish narrative tradition, there is not only great ideal love, but also heroic narratives as well. However, in these stories there is no indication of time and space. Generally, there are not any psychological details about the hero in the narrative. Descriptions of the hero and his beloved are made depending on the audience's imagination.

In Turkish oral folk-stories, action has got four stages(Spies 1941, Moran 1985):

1. Hero's extra-ordinary birth.
2. Hero's love: He loves the girl in his dream or he loves her when he sees a picture of hers or he loves her at the first sight.
3. Hero's adventure: He leaves home and starts to look for his beloved one. In this period he has to fight against natural or super-natural creatures and he has to overcome all these difficulties.

4. The happy ending: generally, the hero finds his beloved and they become married. However, sometimes the lover and the beloved cannot come together or they come together and die. In this case, the audience's expectation is about the life after death and it is believed that lovers meet after death.

This outline is similar to the outline of romance of European oral culture. Romances and Turkish folk-stories are more realistic than folk-tales. In these stories, there is an ideal hero, ideal love, in other words ideal life and world. This world is sometimes realistic, but sometimes imaginary. The characters in these stories are either good or bad. Both in novels and Turkish folk-stories, love and chaste are two great virtues. Besides, both novels and Turkish folk-stories aim to entertain the reader without mentioning the problems of the real life. They repeat particular patterns and finish with a happy ending. In spite of the feature mentioned above according to Northrop Frye, romance established the realistic novel (Moran 1983). However, the first examples of the Turkish novel not only benefited from the Turkish folk-stories, but also from the "mesnevi" and the Turkish folk tales as well. "Mesnevi" is a kind of poem that is, in a way, the narratives of the Classical Ottoman literature in verse form.

The great Turkish literature historian Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, compares the West stories and the East narratives and concludes by saying, "Western novels depend on epics and the Eastern novels depend on tales. Besides, in the Western novels, individual is so important; because the hero must live and fight in the real life. The Eastern novels has got lyrical themes and impressive dream like world; but in these narratives the hero can't succeed in overcoming his own limits"(Tanpınar 1992: 128-130).

Tanpınar added that "In the Eastern narratives, individual has got only two limits: One of them is "the desire" and the other one is "the separateness". This philosophy or point of view remains the same through the ages, because individual and society remain the same as well. These stories are beyond individual and real life; and

they do not establish a literature that depends on the individual. For that kind of literature “individual” must be valuable, but life is limited and subjective. The women and men are apart from each other; personal experiences are very limited and social associations never change. In the light of this point we can’t talk about ‘individual’ in the Eastern narratives”(Tanpınar 1992: 58-61).

Regarding these conditions, this type of narrative’s hero is formalised with the Islamic point of view and he is so fatalistic. Because, generally, his birth is also a divine event. Naturally, he is so passive and fatalistic. During his adventure, he gets a lot of help from the God. Apparently he is lonely but he feels that God is always with him.

In Turkish folk-stories, there is only one hero; there are not two or three heroes. All the events related to the narrative as well as the actions are only about this hero. Sometimes this hero has got some extra-ordinary powers that are given to him by the God. He has to fight against some evil powers or bad persons. However, in the end, he is the one who always wins. He is generally from the upper class, from the highest social class, he is the son of a sultan and he is the only child of his parents. He is combative and very romantic(Boratav 1988).

All oral narrative, heroes share the above mentioned characteristics. They all have similar features. So, we can not talk about “the individual” in oral narratives. This type of hero is not an “individual” but a type! It is not possible to find any psychological details about him in the narrative. This ideal hero symbolises and carries on ideals and hopes. Sometimes he rebels against all injustices. This is the most important mission of the hero.

However in the Turkish folk-tale, “individual” is more idealistic than the one in folk-stories. Tale’s hero is a good, fearless, noble, helpful, intelligent, handy, clever, honest and patient person.

He always takes good care of the traditions and moral values of the society. He fights against difficulties and deserves the happy end. However, some Turkish tales deviate from the others, for example *Keloğlan* tales. The hero, *Keloğlan* has some significant differences when compared to the traditional hero. *Keloğlan* is not a real hero, but an anti-hero! He contradicts with the typical heroes of the other tales or folk-stories.

He is an ugly, bald-headed, lazy, poor, fearless, daring, foxy, tricky, rough, but sympathetic and clever young person. He is brave and active. He never feels himself weak against difficulties and he is always ready to fight against injustice. *Keloğlan* is the symbol of resistance and revolt against the injustice of the real world (Alangu 1983). He is so poor but still he can dare to say “I am going to become married with the daughter of the king”. He can really become married with her; regardless of this bald-head, which becomes golden, at the final part of the tales. There are some similarities between the picaresque character of the Western oral culture and the Turkish *Keloğlan*. The features of the person in the picaresque novel are: keeping himself away from the feudal hierarchy, looking for opportunities for a wealthy life, being some-how deceitful and care-free and by being in an endless journey, remaining active all the time (Naci 1981: 8-10). Although *Keloğlan*, who is a symbol of the poor (low class), is also some-how deceitful and adventures, his journeys end in coming back home that is also a part of the happy ending.

Turks love this young man type and take care of him with sympathy because he is more realistic and acceptable than the other tale's or folk-story's hero. Besides, his characteristic features are not common; they only belong to *Keloğlan*. *Keloğlan* is an anti-hero. He is the one of the well-knit characters in the Turkish oral tales and he is close to the concept of “individual” in Turkish tales. Similar to *Keloğlan*, the other tale's and folk-story's heroes are also typical members of Turkish society. This society's main character has to be

Ottoman, Muslim and Turk. However, religious identity surpasses the national identity. This society is so fatalistic and traditionalist. Therefore hero's struggle is very important for the society.

There are two groups classified with economical and social criteria in these narratives: aristocratic class (High class: sultans, princes, pashas(generals), military-officers, scientist) and folk (Farmers, merchants...). These groups differ from each other by means of economical and cultural criteria and their social life. In the Ottoman Empire, there is not sharp separation between these social classes; they have common Islamic ideology and moral values that are the main themes for the literature.

In the XIXth century, the movement of Westernisation increased the differences between these social classes, because people could not get any benefit from the reforms. The term "Westernisation" meant, the searching for a new model for the Ottoman Empire. Beginning from the XVIIIth century, Ottoman Empire was in a serious economic crisis and this reformist approach has increased the hopes of the intellectuals. These reforms were not initiated by the people, they were initiated by the ruling class. These economical and social reform efforts created a new type of person in the Ottoman Empire. This type of person, which is the individual, came out of the aristocratic group. He was the one who has seen the European countries, who knew Arabic and Persian languages and literature as well as French or English language. He could write, read and do translations from one of these foreign languages into the others. He was intellectual and reformist. In this new social organisation, "individual" could not felt his freedom in the society.

Under these conditions, dualism and opposition have begun to be seen at the economical and political system, the social and cultural structure and the art and literature-life of Ottoman-Turkish society. A new social system has been adapted and supported with the declaration of the Administrative Reforms(Tanzimat) in 1839. Before

the XIXth century, Turkish society has been introduced with the modernism understanding of the West at military and political platforms. On the other platforms, XIXth century was the period of first encounter for Turkish society to meet with the modernism understanding of the West. Beginning with this period, the adventure of becoming an individual of the Turkish society; the society that was influenced by the traditional Islamic world view until that time, has begun.

In the West, social and individual crises were the creators of the novel. However in the Ottoman-Turkish society, the creators of the novel were not the social and individual crises, but the necessity of Westernisation. This is the reason why there is no examination of the society and the individual in the Ottoman-Turkish novel. The nationalistic, traditional and Islamic structure of the society did not permit the birth of the individual in the novels. On the contrary, the novel that is the symbol of the new social understandings and the Western thought can be accepted as the symbol of objection to the known literary norms. Classical Ottoman literature is poetry-central literature. Turkish folk literature, as a product of oral culture, deals with narration as well as poetry. The first novelists were intellectually dependent on Islam and central authority. They have adapted themselves to the traditional folk narrative's structure and the style of conclusion. For this reason, first novelists followed the society's traditional expectation by changing its genre.

The novels that were written in the XIXth century¹ were very helpful tools to follow this adventure. The individual was one of the influential factors in the birth of the novel in the Western society. However, in the Ottoman society, individual has appeared synchronically together with the development of the novel. For a hundred years that is the period in between 1796 to 1896, one of the most important things for the Ottoman-Turkish intellectuals was not

¹ For details: Yalçın 1998.

“the individual” but the adventure of the existence of the Ottoman-Turkish society. For this reason, in the first examples of Ottoman-Turkish novels the main concerns were not literary and aesthetic (such as structure, language, style, plot, narration...) but the ones related to the social benefit.

Naturally oral culture’s heroic type lives in our first novels. They are similar to each other. This heroic type comes from the aristocratic class, he lives in a big city, generally in Istanbul, and he never goes away from Istanbul. He is the one and only son of his parents. He has lost his father; his economical life is dependent on his father’s heritage and mother’s income. He works like an ordinary civil servant; but he is not a productive man.

In contrast to the folk-tales’ hero, first Turkish novels’ basic character was inactive in life. His actions were not physical but emotional, even by the help of these emotional actions he can not explain himself. Generally, he does not want to fight against people and if he fights he is the one who loses the fight. Besides, the heroic type has not got any experience on life, especially on women, similar to the one in *Intibah* (Namık Kemal, 1876). When he meets a woman he falls in love with her and generally this woman is a prostitute or a young girl. Consequently in the first Ottoman-Turkish novels, there are great tragedies in the final part of the novels. Such as basic characters never meet his beloved ones and be happy. Because the society does not approve of these relations and the novel’s basic characters can not fight against the moral rules of the society. Basically, he is bored of these rules and society’s pressure, similar to the ones in *Ta’aşşuk-ı Tal’at ve Fitnat* (Şemsettin Sami, 1872). However he does not have the courage to fight against these rules and pressures as well. He feels himself hopeless, so he obeys the social rules. The reasons of these unhappy endings are the novel character’s inability, most of the times to put himself forward as an individual and his fatalistic point of view.

Nevertheless in some of the first novels of the XIXth century, an ideal happy ending is presented to the reader as well. The main character in the novel, after coming all the difficulties, accomplishes his aim, reunites with his beloved ones and begins a happy and a peaceful life. The only reason that makes the ending folk-tale-like is not the hero's being happy in the end, but, similar to the ones in folk-tales, it is the punishment of the evil and the resolution of all unfairness. From this point of view *Seyr-i Servnaz* and *Sergüzeşt-i Kalyopi* written by Abdi in 1873, are two good examples. The main characters of these novels are not "men", as the ones in the folk tales, but "women". Although this can be beginning period of the Turkish novel, the women of *Seyr-i Servnaz* and *Sergüzeşt-i Kalyopi* show lots of similarities with *Hikâye-i Billur Köşk ile Elmas Sefine*, which is a compilation of the folk's common fairy tales. The novels *Seyr-i Servnaz* and *Sergüzeşt-i Kalyopi*, similar to *Billur Köşk* folk-tales end with the resolution of the unfairness which the young woman, the main character of the novel, had experienced. Besides the young woman reunite with her beloved ones and turns back to her former happy and prosperous life. These narratives meet the expectations of the readers who still want to find fairy-tale like ideal endings.

Similar to these novels, in novels like *Hasan Mellah*(Ahmet Midhat, 1874) and *Öksüz Kaptan* (Ali Rıza, 1875), which are "men"(male) oriented sentimental adventure novels, the novel characters attain an ideal happy ending. This ending is both related to the gist of the narrative that the reader is supposed to the find and the reader's concept of fairness (justice).

Regardless of the things they have done through-out the novel, these heroes can not be considered as "individuals". The reason for this is; they neither have a deep psychological character nor individual activeness. Most of the main characters of the early XIXth century pre-Ottoman-Turkish novels are similar to the hero's of the oral culture, related to the actions of the daily life, open to the outside world and the ones who behave according to the norms of the

society, impress the society with physical actions, some-how exaggerated, type-cast and with the words of Forster (1985) “one dimensional-straight forward” people. In the actions of these people not causality but continuity is dominant (Finn 1984). In this case, what directs they are not their identity or character but their actions.

In these novels, although the character is so emotional he is not contradicting himself. Because he is just a person, not an “individual” or he does not know how to be an individual. Writers themselves do not know how to create an individual either. Because they concentrate on learning how to write a novel and in the Eastern-Islamic narrative tradition. There is not any psychological analysis in the narrative as well. So they do not have any experience in writing novels. Writers are also inexperienced on how to create a social life in the novel. They only give a panoramic view of the Ottoman-Turkish society in the XIXth century. Generally this society is symbolised with an ordinary Turkish family. This is a small family and the basic characters are the son and his mother; in most of the novels of this type, father has already died. This family has an extra-ordinary life due to the money that they inherited from the father. In the final part of the novel, the family becomes poor.

In the pre-Ottoman-Turkish novels, society’s traditions and moral rules are discussed and the negative sides of these rules are exhibited. Because the novel character’s main problems are these rules. These rules, make life miserable for the character, but he never revolts against these rules. He presents the same inactive character as the heroes in other folk-tales.

In conclusion, we can think of the Turkish folk-story’s and folk-tale’s main character together with the one in the first novels. In the birth of the Turkish novel, the novel’s character picks up a lot of features from the Turkish oral culture’s hero. They have a lot of common features. It is also the demand of the reader group; because still the audience identity has not changed into the real reader

identity. As a result, writers carried on the features of the traditional oral culture to the first novels.

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