



NARRATIVES OF HEALTH AND ILLNESS: CARE AND POWER WITHIN, AGAINST AND BEYOND MEDICINE

The Self-in-Crisis in the Contemporary Turkish Novel: A Case for the Relevance of Medical Humanities

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Reversing Stendhal's famous dictum, Sibel Irzik once pointed out that in Turkish literature, "politics is never a 'pistol shot in the middle of a concert'" (2003: 555), which is true to a great extent in the case of the novel genre. From its earliest examples around the turn of the twentieth century, the Turkish novel has always been very much preoccupied with political issues in their relation to social concerns and historical narratives. However, another equally prominent theme prevails in the Turkish novelistic tradition. My earlier research has shown that even the most political self in the Turkish literary imagination is almost always tormented by the processes of individuation, and thus, a self-in-crisis. As my scholarly work has woven in and out of narratives with both political and psychological themes, I have consistently encountered issues concerning the pathologies of the psyche and the mind, the crises of the self, and engagements with various epistemologies of mental health and illness. These themes that parallel and complement the prevalent political ones compose a complex picture of not only the Turkish novelistic imagination but also the cultural transformations that motivate that imagination.

"Madness" is as ubiquitous a subject in Turkish literature as it is in many other global literary traditions. Its representations as an outcome of profound yet unattainable love, as a form of transcendental spirituality, or as a demise of sensitive nervous dispositions have been recurring themes from Anatolian folk narratives to modern texts that are informed by theories of psychology and psychoanalysis (Narlı 2013; Öztürk, Büyükarman, and Şahin 2018). However, in contemporary Turkish novels, a "psychiatric turn" becomes evident in their portrayals of madness.^[1] The depictions constructed in the form of a

medically determined “mental pathology” with hallucinations, amnesia, paranoia, and schizophrenia grow particularly prominent in the works published in the twenty-first century. These portrayals of mental pathologies stand out as prominent types in the depictions of the individual’s alienation and dissociation from society.

My current research programme in examining the self-in-crisis in the Turkish novel analyses the origins and functions of “the psychiatric turn” in representations of madness in contemporary Turkish novels. It examines how the novelists engage with psychiatric medicine and discusses why such an engagement has become prominent in exploring existential crises in the novelistic imagination in recent years. It argues that the materialism of medical science, however precarious it might appear in the case of psychiatry, provides a firm ground in confronting the conflict between social expectations and personal desires, as well as the resultant burden of their dissonance. The markedly cross-disciplinary encounters between literature and psychiatry that take place in the novels highlight the necessity for a criticism informed by interdisciplinary dialogue.

Murat Gülsoy, Hakan Bıçakcı, and Hakan Günday (among others) depict characters with various pathological mental states in their novels.[2]. These writers focus on the intense internal worlds of their characters, as they depict their deeply fraught psychic constitutions. Dreams, nightmares, hallucinations, amnesia, paranoia, and schizophrenia figure prominently in close association with trauma, angst, ennui, and social detachment in their works. The narratives present the torment that the characters suffer from while searching for coherence. In their profound introversion, the characters’ senses of a stable selfhood are shattered, often irretrievably. Sometimes their dissociation goes as far as the figurative or actual annihilation of that very self, i.e., suicide.

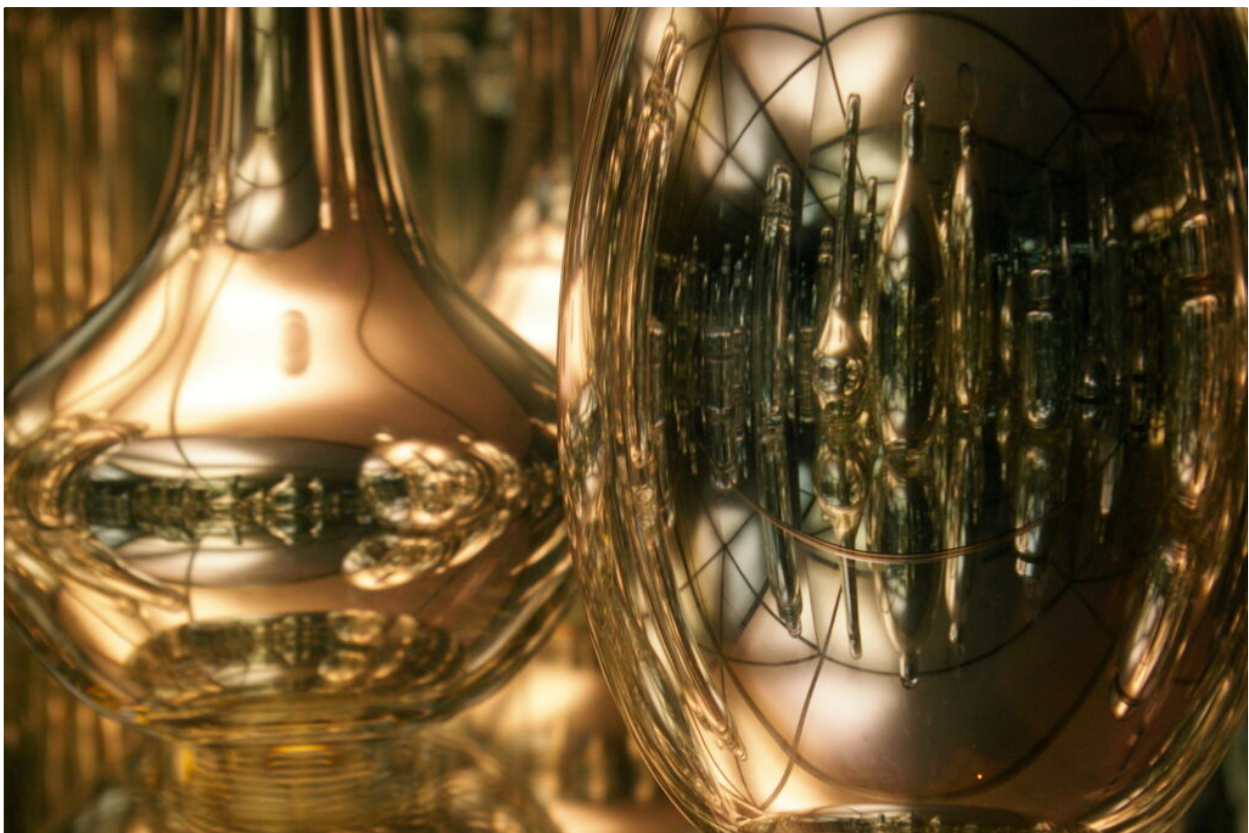
Mental pathologies, for these novelists, are not just symptoms of the inability of the characters to relate to their society and surroundings. The novelists formulate the turmoil of their characters as a remedy to their demise and resistance against the conditions that create their torment. While the characters struggle to change these conditions, they espouse their torment through their pathologies. In the dark, troubled realms of their mental pathology, they withstand the societal assault to their sense of selfhood through a personal undoing that becomes manifest in various kinds of self-destruction as a form of resistance. In their pathological states, these characters become antiheroes and set their self-destructive attitudes against external strains that they deem injurious to their selfhood. *As such, in their paradoxical formulation, they reclaim a form of agency.*

From the Self to Selfhood at the Threshold of the Post[-]Modern

The theme of searching for coherence in a fragmented world in such novels is reminiscent of modernist concerns at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the forms that the characters’ resistance take are suggestive of a postmodernist sensibility. While modernism, though being haunted by fragmentations of the self, displays a belief in literature to cure those fragmentations and create unity,

postmodernism tends to espouse them. As Dennis Brown notes: “Modernist texts would certainly suggest that the fragmentary self is in danger of a radical breakdown.” Yet, they also lay the groundwork for a multiplicity of selfhood that would eventually liberate the representations of the self “from the persisting ghost of unitariness” in postmodernist works (1989: 183). The chosen novelists amply use meta-narratives, multi-layered narrative structures, unreliable narrators, and self-deconstructing texts in order to perform the espousal of fragmentation and dissonance on the level of form.

In “Escape from Insanity: ‘Mental Disorder’ in the Postmodern Moment,” Simon Gottschalk explores the premise that “different epochs and societies foster distinct types of mental disorder” (2000: 18). He discusses the effects of epochal changes from the modern to the postmodern along the lines of the conceptualisation of “the slippery concept of the ‘self.’” He notes that “the dominant modern view specified that the self” – despite its disposition to fragmentation – “was a finite, rational, self-motivated and predictable entity which displayed consistency with itself and others across contexts and time.” He maintains that, in the postmodern context, “the solid and stable modern self loses its footing and becomes fluid, liminal and protean selfhood.” The transition from the relatively secure idea of “the self” to a dynamic, mutable proposition of “selfhood,” which Gottschalk emphasises, impacts upon not only the discourses of mental pathology but also the perception of “normalcy” in an increasingly uncertainty-ridden existence (2000: 21).



“Reflections,” Boston, 2019, Photo by Burcu Alkan

The contemporary literary representations of mental pathologies in the Turkish novel are associated with such a broader transformation of the idea of the stable, modern self into a concept of dynamic selfhood. In fact, the very prevalence of mental pathologies as

such and the ways in which they are aesthetically imagined in transition are arguably symptoms of that transformation. The fact that both the modern and the postmodern self-in-crisis figure alongside each other in the contemporary Turkish novel, even become hybrids of one another, suggests that twenty-first-century Turkish culture is situated at an epochal cusp of rethinking the self and that it moves towards embodying dynamic selfhood as the contemporary paradigm. Therefore, what is at stake in studying these works is not merely their representative value along the lines of a literary transition but their implications in regard to a shift of greater significance: *they map a broader transformation in existential attitudes.*

As the pathologies of the mind become the lynchpin that holds the modernist existential crisis and its postmodernist creative espousal together, these kinds of texts call for a reconsideration of the debates on modernism and postmodernism. Are these renewed narrative encounters with the modernist self-in-crisis in the contemporary, “post-modern” era just a repetition with variation, or has “postmodernism” engendered its own form of existential crisis and responses through them? Ultimately, I argue that contemporary Turkish literature provides a unique answer to this question. In making mental pathology the voice of a modernist self-in-crisis in narratives with postmodern qualities, these novels create a hybrid notion of contemporary selfhood that resides uneasily between the modern and the postmodern.

The Case for Interdisciplinarity: Literature and Mental Health

The argued for psychiatric turn in the contemporary Turkish novel calls for an approach beyond moral, spiritual, and romantic interpretations of the concept of madness and necessitates an engagement with the epistemological framework of psychiatric medicine. However, a methodology that utilises psychiatric concepts to unpack the representations of mental pathology in the novels does not suffice. A critical analytical approach needs to be employed to examine the implications of literary engagements with psychiatric concepts and discuss what such engagements signify for broader issues regarding both fields. It thus proves necessary to establish a bridge between the two by promoting a dialogue.

The contemporary Turkish novels that explore the theme of the self-in-crisis in the suggested fashion draw on psychiatric epistemology through symptomatic and diagnostic details. The medically-defined mental pathologies as such present the multitude of ways in which the characters’ existential crisis is triggered. These mental pathologies and their implications become manifest in association with *five thematic patterns*:

- 1) pressures of various social expectations and societal demands
- 2) self-imposed pressures and anxieties resulting from personal pasts,
- 3) intense traumatic experiences

4) exceptional intelligence or creativity

5) organic and/or neurological disorders

While the presented mental pathologies categorically correlate with more than one of these patterns in each case, specific ones also stand out depending on the novelists' priorities in utilising them.

For instance, a trained psychologist, biomedical engineer, and creative writing teacher, Murat Gülsoy (b. 1967) focuses on the creative processes of the mind. Mental pathologies, creative practices, and the tormented self are often amalgamated as he combines the narratives of his characters, the various kinds of texts they write, and the actual novels themselves through a multilayered meta-textuality that has either a direct or an implied relevance to the characters' senses of selfhood. His protagonists engage with different kinds of texts as writers, readers, or both. In works such as *Karanlığın Aynasında* (2010, *In the Mirror of Darkness*), *Baba, Oğul ve Kutsal Roman* (2012, *The Father, the Son, and the Holy Novel*), and *Gölgeler ve Hayaller Şehrinde* (2014, *In the City of Shadows and Dreams*), the boundaries between the realities of the narratives and their self-reflexive textuality are blurred through the utilisation of mental pathologies. While the characters' narratives are rendered unreliable due to their broken psychic states, the meta-textuality of the novels underscores the unreliability of the depicted pathologies themselves.

Dreams, remembering, forgetting, the constructed nature of memory and perceptions, and the elusiveness of reality also become issues that Gülsoy's characters tackle in an attempt to maintain their internal integrity. Through the depictions of the relationship between the brain and the mind, he explores ideas of selfhood, particularly in moments of crisis, self-doubt, and confusion. His portrayal of the relationship between the mind and the self relates to both organic processes and imagined possibilities. In *Nisyan* (2013, *Oblivion*), an old writer is depicted in the grip of dementia, which manifests itself in his inability to "command the words" and having become "their plaything."^[3] He is thus tormented by the loss of what fundamentally constitutes his sense of selfhood. In *Yalnızlar İçin Çok Özel Bir Hizmet* (2016, *A Very Special Service for the Lonesome*), the novelist portrays a man who hosts the consciousnesses of two other people in his mind as a part of an experiment. Eventually, he risks losing his own sense of selfhood.

Another contemporary writer, Hakan Bıçakçı (b. 1978) also takes on creativity in its relation to mental pathologies in a majority of his novels. However, unlike Gülsoy, Bıçakçı focuses on the creative personality itself as opposed to the creative processes of the mind. His characters are generally obsessive types with creative or similar aspirations, such as a musician in *Apartman Boşluğu* (2008, translated into English as *The Apartment Shaft*), a photographer in *Karanlık Oda* (2010, *The Dark Room*), and a scholar in *Boş Zaman* (2004, *Spare Time*). Inspiration from dubious, mysterious, and hallucinatory influences alongside intense introversion that lead to a confusion of dream and reality are trademarks of his novels. For instance, during his total and obsessive social isolation,

the protagonist of *Apartman Boşluğu* relies on hallucinatory melodies that emerge from a hole in the wall for his extraordinary pieces of music.

In most of Bıçakcı's novels, the protagonists suffer from ennui and existential angst in response to the superficial and meaningless routines of their daily lives. The mental pathologies of the protagonists are presented through dreams, hallucinations, and psychotic breakdowns. A rare example in this context, the female protagonist of *Doğa Tarihi* (2014, History of Doğa/Nature) suffers from anorexia under the extreme pressures of the competitive, white-collar, plaza life. She begins seeing little blue men around her as she has a nervous breakdown. While the photographer of *Karanlık Oda* acquires mysterious bite marks all over his body after an uncanny experience in a strange neighbourhood, the protagonist of *Rüya Günlüğü* (2003, The Dream Diary) ends up leading two lives simultaneously as his dream and waking worlds intermingle. With his young, frustrated, and troubled characters, Hakan Bıçakcı is a representative of contemporary writers who tell the stories of the millennials and voice their self-search in the Turkey of twenty-first century.



"The Lighthouse," Cunda, 2011, Photo by Burcu Alkan

Hakan Günday (b. 1976), who is the winner of the 2015 *Prix Médicis étranger*, similarly depicts highly exceptional characters. However, unlike those of Gülsoy and Bıçakcı, his protagonists are extremely nihilistic anti-heroes, some of whom are traumatised by their childhood experiences. Their self-destructive nihilism becomes manifest in their psychopathic character formations. Beginning with his first novel *Kinyas ve Kayra* (2000, Kinyas and Kayra), in which he depicts two young men in their harsh world of random sex, drugs, alcohol, and violence, Günday portrays characters that excel in abusing

themselves as well as others, and often both at the same time. The novelist thus establishes a unique style of deeply-troubled characters that he maintains in all of his novels. While some of his characters come from good backgrounds and/or have good potential but choose to rebel (e.g., in *Kinyas ve Kayra* and *Piç* [2003, *Bastard*]), others are survivors of childhood abuse and trauma and never really have a chance in life. However questionable their choices are, the latter struggle to create their own opportunities (e.g., in *Zargana* [2002, *Garfish*], *Az* [2011, *A Few*] and *Daha* [2013, *More*]). Consequently, a feeling of introverted suffocation permeates the lives of Günday's characters, which is paralleled stylistically in their convoluted and voluminous narratives.

Günday's novels are often raw, brutal, and bent on various forms of destruction, particularly self-destruction. He gives a formidable tone to what could be deemed a contemporary form of nihilism as his characters ramble on with their forbidding philosophical rhetoric. While his brilliant but extremely troubled characters emerge as the embodiments of traumatising personal histories, Günday creates broader contexts for their sufferings. Whether the characters are victims, perpetrators, or both, their narratives unravel the underground worlds of local and global ghettos (e.g. in *Kinyas ve Kayra* and *Az*), dynamics of extreme religious groups and violent street gangs (e.g. in *Az* and *Zargana*), and illegal immigration and international corruption (e.g. in *Daha* and *Kinyas ve Kayra*). Similar to Bıçakçı, Günday also tells the stories of the millennials, albeit in a rather dark fashion. Combined with an interest in broader social issues, his depictions of the frustrations of the generation are not only timely but also skilful, and thus, his works have achieved international appeal. His *Az* and *Daha* were translated into English (and other European languages) and were praised as cognisant and perceptive of the new generation's *zeitgeist*.

In the context of the Turkish novel, the theme of the self-in-crisis is not just about the prominent representations of "madness" or existential crises as outcomes of a particular moment in history. As many contemporary novels, only a fraction of which is mentioned in this post, attest, what is at stake in the Turkish case is a complex amalgamation of the emergence of the novel genre, the social and political transformation of the country, the questions of modernity, the aesthetics of modernism and postmodernism, and the novelistic imagination that parallels them. They point to a perpetual sense of the self-in-crisis, that is, a never-ending trauma with both endogenous and exogenous parameters and a multi-layered existential turmoil.

Footnotes

[1]. This "psychiatric turn" flows in the opposite direction as well. Several Turkish psychiatrists have been actively producing literary works in a variety of genres in the past couple of decades. I have previously written on this aspect of the "psychiatric turn," see "The Psychiatrist as Novelist in Contemporary Turkish Literature" (2018).

[2] While writers such as Şebnem İşigüzel and Aslı Erdoğan also explore such themes in their works, a certain gender tendency towards the masculine stands out in the engagements with the pathological self-in-crisis both in terms of authorship and characterisation. Female characters and woman writers tend to have a different, often feminist take on their senses of the self-in-crisis, which is generally a result of the broader, systemic social problems. However, other forms of engagements with “mental pathologies” are still available.

[3] For an excerpt from the novel’s unpublished English translation, see wanderlustpress.net <https://wanderlustpress.net/2022/09/11/excerpt-from-nisyan-oblivion-by-murat-gulsoy/>

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