

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
TURKIC FICTION

Prof. Talat S Halman

19th CENTURY

The Turkish venture into the realm of European-type **fiction** started in the 1870s. In the early decades, there was lack of clarity about the basic terms—short story or novella or novel? The pioneering works of fiction came from Ahmet Mithat Efendi (1844–1912), Emin Nihat (d. ca. 1875), and Şemsettin Sami (1850–1904). Of these writers, Ahmet Mithat Efendi, remarkably prolific with scores of novels and collections of short stories he wrote or translated, popularized fiction. Emin Nihat, who died young, produced a single work, *Müsameretname*, a mélange of Boccaccio-like stories, mainly about love and adventure. Şemsettin Sami is generally credited as the author of the first Turkish novel; it deals with the need of schooling for girls and with the problems of arranged marriages.

The prominent poet Namık Kemal produced two novels: *İntibah* (Vigilance), which cautions virtuous people about dissolute living and wicked deeds perpetrated against them, and *Cezmi*, which shows better writing skill and was the first Turkish historical novel. In his only novel, *Mizancı Murat* (1854–1917), a respected intellectual and historian, gave voice to his critical views of sociopolitical problems and offered the idea of Islamic unity as a panacea. Promising short stories came from Samipaşazade Sezai (1859–1936) whose novel *Sergüzeşt* (1888), about human bondage introduced the techniques of realism in a firm manner. From Nabizade Nâzım (1862–1893) came the first novella of a Turkish village that heralded naturalism. He also wrote perhaps the earliest specimen of psychological fiction, *Zehra* (published posthumously in 1894), depicting a case of pathological jealousy.

Recaizade Ekrem, a leading poet and *littérateur*, who also emerged as an important theoretician of aesthetics and a major critic, produced late in his career a satirical novel entitled *Araba Sevdası* (Love for Surrey, 1896), introducing as its protagonist an Ottoman dandy caught in the web of family troubles. This novel successfully caricatured the excesses of Europeanization.

The Ottoman East–West syndrome in the search for European type of reform was perhaps best delineated by Ahmet Mithat Efendi, who assumed for himself the mission of educating the public by dint of literary works. His fiction and essays strove to preserve the best of Islamic values in the Westernizing endeavor of the Ottomans. His 1876 novel with a Europeanized protagonist, *Felâhât Bey*, and the virtuous traditionalist, *Rakım Efendi*, cautioned modernizers regarding the risk of losing their authentic identity.

Ahmet Mithat and most of the late-nineteenth-century novelists maintained a utilitarian stance about the function of fiction—mainly to educate readers, to sensitize them concerning the status and rights of women, to create a better social system.

When the ideal of “art for art’s sake” gained strength with the establishment of the *Servet-i Fünun* group, the turn of the century witnessed the appearance of the first truly refined Turkish novel, *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Forbidden Love) by Halit Ziya (Uşaklıgil) (1866–1945). This well-constructed novel depicts the life and the tribulations of a prosperous Istanbul family. Its narrative technique is gripping, its story line strong, with characters well delineated and dialogue vivid. First serialized in a daily newspaper, it was published in book form in 1900. *Aşk-ı Memnu* can arguably vie with some of Europe’s best novels of the time. Halit Ziya authored several other major works, *Mai ve Siyah* (The Blue and the Black, 1897), and *Kırık Hayatlar* (Broken Lives, 1924), mostly about human suffering.

A year after *Aşk-ı Memnu* appeared on the literary scene, another major talent, Mehmet Rauf (1874–1931), published a psychological tour de force entitled *Eylül* (September, 1901).

Thus, the start of the twentieth century augured well for the Turkish novel, which was destined to take strides toward impressive diversity and workmanship in the ensuing era, eventually culminating in the Nobel Prize.

Attaching themselves to the rising star of fiction, numerous late Ottoman authors—principally Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar (1864–1944), Refik Halit Karay (1888–1965), Halide Edib Adıvar (1884–1964), Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974), and Reşat Nuri Güntekin (1889–1956) produced easily readable works whose characters are identifiable and whose dialogues in the simple vernacular. Güntekin’s *Çalıkuşu* (1922; The

Autobiography of a Turkish Girl, 1949), about a young woman who works in the rural areas as a schoolteacher, became a sensation and remained a best-seller for many decades. Güntekin and the others dominated the fiction of the early decades of the republic as well.

20th CENTURY

Early Fiction. The early novels of the republic depicted the disintegration of Ottoman society, ferocious political enmities, and the immoral lives of some members of religious sects, as well as the conflicts between urban intellectuals and poverty-stricken peasants—as in the novels of Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974). Turkey’s major female intellectual and advocate of women’s rights, Halide Edib Adivar (1882–1964), produced sagas of the War of Liberation, psychological novels, and panoramas of city life. Her novelistic art culminated in *Sinekli Bakkal* (1936), which she originally published in English in 1935 under the title *The Clown and His Daughter*.

Anatolian Fiction. The harsh realities of Anatolia found fertile ground in the literature of engagement after World War II. Sabahattin Ali (1907–48) was a pioneer of forceful fiction about the trials and tribulations of the lower classes. Two books, both published in 1950 — *Bizim Köy* (*Our Village; A Village in Anatolia*) by Mahmut Makal (b. 1930) and *Toprak Ana* by Fazıl Hüsnü Dağlarca — exerted a shattering impact on political and intellectual circles by dramatically exposing conditions in villages. The first, available in English translation, is a series of vignettes written by Makal, a teenage peasant who became a village teacher after graduating from one of the controversial Institutes for Village Teachers. The book reveals the abject poverty of the Anatolian village:

Village Novel. In the mid-1950s a brave new genre emerged—the “Village Novel,” which reached its apogee with Yaşar Kemal’s *İnce Memed* (translated into English under the title *Memed, My Hawk*, 1961). Yaşar Kemal (b. 1923), the most famous twentieth-century Turkish novelist at home and abroad was frequently mentioned not only in Turkey but also in the world press and literary circles as a strong candidate for the Nobel Prize. His impressive corpus of fiction, written in a virtually poetic style, ranks as one of the truly stirring achievements in the history of Turkish literature.

Dealing with the merciless reality of poverty, village literature portrays the peasant threatened by natural disaster and man’s inhumanity. The drama is enacted in terms of economic and psychological deprivation, blood feuds, stagnation and starvation, droughts, the tyranny of the gendarmes and petty officials, and exploitation at the hands of landowners and politicians. The lithe style records local dialects with an almost flawless accuracy. A pessimistic tone pervades much of village literature: its delineations are bleak even when occasional flashes of humor or a glimmer of hope or descriptions of nature’s beauty appear. A great strength of the genre is its freedom from the rhetoric that mars much of the poetry of social protest. When presenting deprived men and women pitted against hostile forces, the best practitioners offered an affirmation of the human spirit. Their works are often testaments to the dauntless determination of the peasant to survive and to resist—sometimes through rebellion—the forces of oppression.

Urban Fiction. Urban writers deal with a broad diversity of social problems in major cities. Accomplished novelist Abdülhak Şinasi Hisar (1888–1963) enjoys fame for nostalgic and sometimes satiric depictions of high-class life in old Istanbul. Peyami Safa (1899–1961), one of Turkey’s most prolific authors, dealt with social problems, cultural tensions, and psychic crises in his many highly readable novels.

Fiction about the urban poor shares some of the strengths of the Village Novel—engrossing plot, effective narration, realistic dialogue—and suffers from some of the comparable flaws—lack of subtlety and of psychological depth. The leading writer of fiction depicting the tribulations of working-class people is Orhan Kemal (1914–70). Necati Cumalı (1921–2001), a prolific poet and playwright, wrote tellingly about poverty-stricken individuals in rural and coastal areas. Osman Cemal Kaygılı (1890–1945) penned poignant stories of the lumpenproletariat and the gypsies.

Sait Faik The short-story writer Sait Faik (1906–54) is admired for his meditative, rambling romantic fiction, full of intriguing insights into the human soul, capturing the pathos and the bathos of urban life in a style unique for its poetic yet colloquial flair.

Sait Faik’s career, which spanned barely twenty-five years from about 1929 to 1954, yielded an output that displays a considerable variety of themes and techniques although virtually all of his stories have certain similarities—his unmistakable style, the focal importance of the narrator, the preoccupation with social outcasts and marginal groups, and an unflinching ear for colloquial speech. His stories can in their range of feeling and creative strategies be

likened to many disparate works by some of his predecessors, contemporaries, and successors outside Turkey. One occasionally finds plots worthy of a de Maupassant, moods reminiscent of a Chekhov, and sometimes the lucidity of a Maugham, although none of these writers—not even some of the French writers Sait Faik presumably read during his stay in Grenoble—seems to have had any direct influence on him. In some stories, the Turkish writer gives us a blend of fantasy and concrete fact as well as the interplay of different levels of reality in the Faulknerian manner. In others, one finds a structural clarity and a crispness of language typical of Hemingway. Sait Faik's later stories occasionally read like Donald Barthelme's early work, sharing the same eerie sensations of a foray into the realms of fantasy.

Cevat Sakir Cevat Şakir (1886–1973), who adopted the pen name “Halikarnas Balıkcısı” (The Fisherman of Halicarnassus), a polyglot who also wrote in English, produced gripping novels about common people, especially fishermen, on the Aegean coast.

Historical Fiction. An awakening of interest in Ottoman history after several decades of neglect gave rise to a massive semidocumentary novel by Kemal Tahir (1910–73), *Devlet Ana* (Mother State, 1967), a saga of the emergence of the Ottoman state in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. The Turkish War of Liberation (1919–22), as in the previous decades, inspired numerous major novels—*Yorgun Savaşçı* (The Tired Warrior, 1965) by Kemal Tahir, *Kalpakkıllar* (Men in Fur Caps, 1962) and *Doludizgin* (Full Gallop, 1963) by Samim Kocagöz (1916–93), and *Kutsal İsyan* (The Sacred Uprising, 1966–68), in eight volumes, by Hasan İzzettin Dinamo (1909–89).

Attılâ İlhan produced a two-volume portrayal (à la Dos Passos's U.S.A.) of the crises of Turkish society following World War II, entitled *Kurtlar Sofrası* (A Feast for Wolves, 1963)

Social Realists. The best social realists in the second half of the twentieth century included Fakir Baykurt (1929–99), Çetin Altan (b. 1927), Dursun Akçam (1930–2003), Talip Apaydın (b. 1926), Tarık Dursun K. (b. 1931), Vedat Türkali (b. 1919), Kemal Bilbaşar (1910–83), Mehmet Seyda (1919–86), and Zeyyat Selimoğlu (1922–2000). Highly imaginative fiction came from Nahit Sırrı Örik (1894–1960), who wrote compellingly about the late Ottoman period, as did Hıfzı Topuz (b. 1923), a writer of semidocumentary fiction. Another major figure is Peride Celal (b. 1916), whose work evolved from popular novels to sophisticated psychological fiction and an epic treatment of democracy beset by conflicts. Sevim Burak (1931–83) was a successful practitioner of Faulknerian narrative techniques. A multitalented author, Zülfü Livaneli (b. 1946) has to his credit many diverse novels, some of which have enjoyed considerable success in Turkey as have their translations abroad. The short-story scene, which was dominated in the mid-twentieth century by such figures as Sait Faik, Memduh Şevket Esendal (1883–1952), and Nezihe Meriç (1925–2009), and later by Tomris Uyar (1941–2003) and Sevgi Soysal (1936–76), now flourishes, thanks to the work of Cemil Kavukçu (b. 1951), Hasan Ali Toptaş (b. 1958), and others.

1980's Since the 1980s, the art of the novel has taken giant strides thanks in part to the growing corpus of Yaşar Kemal and to the impressive work of Adalet Ağaoğlu (b. 1929), Tahsin Yücel (b. 1933), Vüs'at O. Bener (1922–2005), Erhan Bener (1929–2007), Attılâ İlhan, and others. Elif Şafak (b. 1971) enjoys wide fame internationally thanks to her provocative novels that interfuse traditional values and innovative features. The first decade of the twenty-first century has enjoyed what can be characterized as “the post-postmodern” fiction of numerous younger writers—for instance, Tuna Kiremitçi, Müge İplikçi, Perihan Mağden, Cezmi Ersöz, Şebnem İyigüzel, Sema Kaygusuz as well as Ahmet Ümit (b. 1960), who is gaining wide recognition as a master of suspense thrillers, a rare genre in Turkey.

Orhan Pamuk In Turkey and abroad, Orhan Pamuk (b. 1952) has emerged as a compelling precursor of new dimensions in the Turkish novelistic art. His major works have been successfully translated into nearly fifty languages, the English versions attracting wide attention and winning a number of major international awards. Pamuk's meteoric rise culminated in his winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2006. It is significantly that this first Nobel Prize won by a Turk in any field went to a literary figure because literature remains the premier cultural genre among Turks. Pamuk himself asserted that the prize was awarded principally to Turkish language and literature. Although some intellectuals acknowledge this to be a fact, many believe that the prize was awarded in recognition of Pamuk's own creative work; some claim he received the prize because he made damaging remarks about incidents in Ottoman history and contemporary life. Pamuk's formula for success has been postmodernism plus some Turkish exoticism. He has been likened to several giants of modern literature. Such kinships tend to provide a fairly easy passage to fame abroad. The risk involved, however, is that similarities may not sustain the

inherent value of the oeuvre for long—unless the writer from the other culture finds a voice uniquely his own, explores new forms, and creates a synthesis beyond a pat formula based on what is in fashion.

It would not be incorrect, however, to assert that Pamuk is at present proceeding away from “influences” toward an authentic, original novelistic art—a new synthesis as evinced by his first post-Nobel novel, *Masumiyet Müzesi* (2008; *The Museum of Innocence*, 2009). His first novel, *Cevdet Bey ve Oğulları* (*Cevdet Bey and His Sons*, 1982) is a *Buddenbrooks* type of work in three volumes that traces a family’s life over three generations as well as the process of Turkish modernization from the early twentieth century onward. *Sessiz Ev* (*Quiet House*, 1983) skillfully fuses modern and traditional novelistic techniques, utilizing five major characters who narrate the story through their stream of consciousness. The later two works remain untranslated into English, although both have fascinating features. *Beyaz Kale* (1985), published in English translation in 1990 as *The White Castle*, is a tour de force about the intriguing interaction between a Venetian and an Ottoman look-alike who symbolize diverse aspects of the cultural tensions between East and West.

Kara Kitap (1990; *The Black Book* of 1994 and 2006) was hailed as a masterwork, especially in Europe and the United States and solidified Pamuk’s reputation. It masterfully depicts the mysteries of Istanbul and evokes the traditional values of Sufism. *Yeni Hayat* (1995; *The New Life*, 1997) is a travel novel woven in a poetic style that deals with imagination gone awry, youthful despair, and republican idealism thwarted.

The success of two novels in particular—*Benim Adım Kırmızı* (1998; *My Name is Red*, 2001), a powerful novel about miniature painters in the Ottoman capital in 1591, and *Kar* (2002; *Snow* 2004), Pamuk’s most patently political work—led to his Nobel Prize. His *Istanbul: Hatıralar ve Şehir* (2003; *Istanbul: Memories and the City*, 2005), a beguilingly evocative description of his beloved and sorrowful city, enhanced his international prestige. His *Masumiyet Müzesi* is avowedly a novel of love, marriage, friendship, sexuality, family life, and happiness. Pamuk was crowned the novel’s success by opening a museum by the same name in Istanbul.