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The Psychiatrist as Novelist in Contemporary Turkish Literature: Pushing the Boundaries of the Real

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Abstract

In the past decade, several psychiatrist-novelists established a niche for themselves in Turkish literature and their works draw interest from both their particular readership and the broader literary circles. It is not unusual for the members of a medical field that is preoccupied with understanding the psyche through personal narratives to turn toward a realm that have similar motivations. However, the limited number of such writers globally renders this trend in Turkish literature unique. Furthermore, the works of these psychiatrist-novelists stand out with their pushing the boundaries of the real in various ways. Narratives of pathology, science, and fantasy predominate their oeuvre. This article argues that the high number of psychiatrist-novelists in contemporary Turkish literature and their preference over narratives that challenge the concept of reality are related to their profession. It discusses how their personal and professional experiences in medicine manifest as a key influence in their creative endeavours.

Keywords: Contemporary Turkish Literature; Psychiatrist Novelists; Medical Humanities; Psychiatry and Literature.

Introduction

Madness is a globally and historically ubiquitous theme in literature and Turkish literature is no exception when it comes to its literary representations. There are vilified and romanticised portrayals of madness as well as depictions of psychoanalysis and modern psychiatry. However, an interesting reverse flow also becomes manifest in contemporary times. In the past couple of decades, a considerable number of psychiatrists in Turkey have contributed to the literary sphere with their poems, novels, and short stories, often alongside their scholarly output. Enough number of these psychiatrists' creative works achieved literary success to highlight a noticeable trend in contemporary Turkish literature. While the poetry of Behçet Aysan, Yusuf Alper, and Kemal Sayar and the short stories of Cem Atbaşoğlu and Cem Mumcu stand out, the novel emerges as the predominant genre. Engin Geçtan, Levent Mete, Ahmet (Balad) Coşkun, Kaan Arslanoğlu, and others have published numerous novels that reveal a

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Dedication: I dedicate this article to the memory of Engin Geçtan who passed away shortly before it came out.



flourishing creative impetus. The novel form seems to be an attractive medium for the psychiatrist writers to practise their inquisitive and creative skills, as it enables in-depth analyses and stylistic experiments through its adaptable length and format.

Challenging the concept of reality is a key pattern and a shared component of the psychiatrist-novelists' literary works. In a world that is very real with suffering patients and in which the perception of the real itself is a main concern in terms of symptoms and cures, their noticeable inclination toward exploring reality and pushing its boundaries in the flexible space of fiction is apposite. Whether symptoms such as hallucinations and delusions deriving from biochemical issues or problematic perceptions of the self due to psychological conditions, the encounter between the "reality" of the external with the patients' narratives of the "real" behoves the medical practitioner to maintain an open mind about the varying possibilities of reality.

Pathological challenges to reality are not so simply definable as is often assumed. For instance, while the voices heard by a mental health patient might not be accessible to others, the reality of those voices to the one hearing is undeniable. That they are not "real" to the outside world does not make them any less real to the person who is experiencing them. In fact, the case of the voice-hearer is a good example of both the challenges to and the transformation in the perceptions of reality within the field of mental health. Angela Woods states, "Before 1987 there were no voice-hearers" (2013: 2), referring to the paradigm shift in the ideas of voice-hearing in psychiatry. This paradigm shift becomes possible when a patient (Patsy Hague) persuades her doctor (Marius Romme) about the presence of the voices she hears and her doctor's cooperation in helping her make sense of them. Through such cases, Woods stresses the significance of voice-hearing as a "narrative mode of being, one that is performative, personally and socially meaningful, polysemic and open to change" (2013: 5). This transformation in the understanding of the reality of voice-hearing as a highly personal, narrativistic experience with diverse possibilities of meaning is an approach that establishes a kinship with the literary sphere.

The reality of the literary work being pertinent to its own realm creates an analogous path of debate. The "real" of literary narratives does not reside within the so-called reliable truthfulness of a factual world but exists in its own sphere of significations within the fictional. That the characters of a novel are not real or even realistic does not undermine the reality of the assembly of meanings introduced through them. As Derek Allan underlines, literature "seeks to capture its own quite distinct reality" (2001: 155). Its contribution to the world of "realities" is the realness of the latent



material comprising of impressions, emotions, and perceptions, regardless of the realistic or unrealistic shapes they may take. Virginia Woolf describes such an idea of the “real” along the lines of a character’s

power to make you think not merely of it itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes—of religion, of love, of war, of peace, of family life, of balls in country towns, of sunsets, moonrises, the immortality of the soul. (1924)

The literary narrative is a unique opportunity for both the writer and the reader to delve into the intense, intricate, and elaborate world of being human with its multitude of complexities.

Although they are touching the issue from two different positions, their imperative to acknowledge the fluidity of the idea of reality maintain the affinity of literature and psychiatry. The analogy between the physical existence of words on a page culminating in certain effects in the mind and the neural projections of the phenomenal world in the same topography is somewhat more than symbolic. What is perceived is not purely what is experienced through the senses but is defined by the self that experiences it. This agency of the self in the determination of reality is essential for both literature and psychopathology. Still, a deliberation upon the ontology of reality with its gamut of accounts from various ideational and disciplinary viewpoints is not *realistic* in the limited extent of this study. Instead, as their associations with various forms of narration present a similar affinity in their respective materials and methodologies, I will employ cross-disciplinary readings to inquire into the intersections between psychiatry and literature in a set of exemplary works.

The creative outcome of the kinship between psychiatry and literature becomes manifest in the Turkish psychiatrist-novelists’ interest in stories that transgress the boundaries of the real either through formalistic choices or the subject matters of their narratives, if not both at the same time. In a way, fiction is so blatantly “not real” even at its most realistic that it provides the writers with the kind of freedom that they may lack due to the requirements of their medical work. As such, their preference of narratives that push the boundaries of the real is closely related and probably a direct consequence of their professional experience. The majority of the novels can be categorised in three distinct but often interlaced groups: narratives of pathology, science, and fantasy. While accounts of the pathological mind is clearly natural for these writers, science fiction with futuristic and/or neuroscientific elements are also common, alongside different kinds of the fantastic from the magical to the surreal.



Narratives of Pathology

In psychopathology, the real is assessed in terms of how it is perceived by the mental health patient and the levels of reliability associated with it. However, the issue is not just about the perception of the real by the patient. It is also about how that real is defined by the medical practitioner to determine the existence of pathology. Peter Zachar notes that “reality is usually considered both in (a) evaluating the severity of maladjustment and (b) in debates about the value of psychological understanding and explanation” by the “mental health professions” (2000: 253). Accordingly, the psychiatrist-novelists are already viewing reality from a very particular position that potentially gives them the motivation to explore it from alternative perspectives.

Conceivably, then, in some of the works, the Turkish psychiatrist-novelists openly utilise mental health issues as subject matter. A significant example of this category is Levent Mete’s *Şizofreni Müzesi* (2011, *The Museum of Schizophrenia*). Mete is an active psychiatrist who specialises in schizophrenia. He has seven novels to date, most of which tackle reality in different ways, establishing the repute of his creative style. *Şizofreni Müzesi* is an important text because it not only provides an accessible, creative version of schizophrenia but also depicts it ingeniously well.

The novel is about an intelligent young man who suffers from schizophrenia. Having had to leave school due to his condition, he makes his living by fixing computers in his little shop. The plot revolves around how he grows obsessed about an online game to the extent that leads to his relapse into psychosis. As the protagonist chases after the puzzles in the game, the reality of the outside world blurs away and that of the game takes over, leading to delusions and eventually breakdown. The levels of the game parallel his transformation through the various stages of schizophrenia, which is reflected in the style and structure of the narrative. As such, the text provides the reader with a complex insight into the nature of the illness and to the “realness” of the suffering of being imprisoned in the delusional reality of the protagonist’s mind. *Şizofreni Müzesi* is a gripping and well-written story with its amalgamation of the virtual reality of the game with the distorted daily life of the protagonist toward his breakdown. The quality of the storytelling combined with the knowledge of a complex mental illness renders the novel an epitome of the direct interaction between psychiatry and literature.

Ahmet (Balad) Coşkun, who is not practising medicine any more but running workshops and doing radio shows on literature and psychology, also employs a similar format. He has three novels, *İspinoz* (2011, *The*



Finch), *Fransız Balkon* (2012, *The French Balcony*), and *Acuka* (2014, *Ajuka*). The narrator of *İspinoz* has an internal journey toward and through a traumatising experience, triggered by a photograph. The narrator of *Fransız Balkon* is a young man who is stuck in a wheelchair and unable to communicate with the external world. The narrator of *Acuka* is a hunchback who suffers profoundly from lacking genuine human connection.

Coşkun's works explore intense mental processes and emotional worlds that border at the surreal. Through associative streams of impressions, the narratives press against the limits of how much words can achieve in capturing psychic intensity. Their highly unreliable first person narrators are lonely figures who are silent except for their inner voices that ceaselessly observe, think, and feel. In each case, the characters are mainly immobile, which intensifies their introversion and troubled psychic states. In *Fransız Balkon*, for instance, the narrator, an advanced ALS patient cared for by his father, is fully paralysed except for his ever-watching eyes. The story is laden with Oedipal overtones with the frustrations of the narrator surfacing in his dark thoughts against his devoted father. Towards the end of the novel, the father falling of the French balcony and taking the son down with him is depicted powerfully. However, the intensity of the narration that edges at the surreal puts the actuality of the fall into doubt, highlighting the severe psychic consequences of such an extreme bodily confinement.

Coşkun does not rely on plots, which are meagre in his narratives, to develop his fictive worlds but explores suffocating internal realms whereby the external realities are vague backgrounds that increase the sense of being cramped in internal foregrounds. What "really" happens in the lives of the protagonists merely serve the purpose of holding the stories together and the external reality is skewed and mangled into problematic subjective perceptions. Coşkun's narrative style, which is marked by his rolling elaborate descriptions, matches the intensely introverted experiences of his troubled protagonists and accentuates their deeply subjective realities. With his insider's viewpoint on distorted mental processes, the novelist experiments with the subjectivity of the self, of lived-experience, and of memories in their extreme forms.

Narratives of Science

Due to the images of old infamous treatment methods like lobotomy, the vast pharmaceutical industry, and many other such reasons, psychiatry is probably the most stigmatised branch of medicine. Its scientific credibility and ethical reliability have been challenged and contested passionately from different perspectives; public, popular, and professional (See, for



instance, Szasz 2008, Hirshbein 2016, Hopson 2014). Despite contestations, the means, approaches, and conducts of modern psychiatrists are determined by scientific principles. They rely on an evidence-based, organicist viewpoint concerning biochemical conditions and other material sources of mental pathologies. Their professional expertise as such seems to open up a myriad of pathways, inspiring them to expand the boundaries of existing knowledge toward future possibilities. Accordingly, science fiction emerges as a common trend in Turkish psychiatrist-novelists' works.

Darko Suvin asserts that science fiction is not just a reflection *of* but a reflection *on* reality. The depictions might not necessarily be realistic, but their extrapolation is not irrationally unrealistic either. He defines the relationship between reality and science fiction as “cognitive estrangement,” whereby the outcome is not a “static mirroring” but “a dynamic transformation” (1979: 10). The science adapted from the real is expanded upon, experimented with, and speculated about in order to explore both the constructive and destructive potentials of scientific progress, while maintaining its essential humanistic qualities. The integration of a recognisable viewpoint with a feeling of estrangement in science fiction creates an expedient distance with “reality” that encourages inquisitiveness. Gavin Miller and Anna McFarlane argue for the value of such estrangement in establishing “a critical dialogue with the troubling ideologies of progress offered by the technoscientific imaginary” (2016: 215). They stress that “Science fiction proposes concrete alternatives and fosters critical self-awareness of the contingent activity which gives ‘the future’ substance in the here-and-now.”

Another Levent Mete novel, *Rika'nın Beyninde* (2005, *Inside Rika's Brain*) is a good example of science fiction's critical potential through cognitive estrangement as suggested. The narrative is centred around the idea of preserving brains after bodily death as a form of immortality, whereby people continue to “live” freed from death altogether and existing in a cerebral realm. However, this scientific advancement is also abused by the authorities as a form of punishment. The plot revolves around the search for a dissident, who has committed suicide to escape, in the mind of his daughter. The daughter is suffering from depression after her father's death, and thus, as she contemplates suicide herself, the clock is ticking for both the father and the man who is sent to find him. In a world where selves can travel through minds and bodies, the memories, dreams, and fears of a young girl serve as the stage of a riveting journey. The science-gone-wrong dystopia of the narrative transforms into a colourful fantastic portrayal of the mind beyond the organic.



With its seamless integration of the real and the surreal, *Rika'nın Beyninde* is a text in which Mete's creativity becomes particularly manifest. As the characters travel through the regions of the young girl's mind, a fantastical world of dreams, nightmares, sensations, and various emotions is depicted colourfully and intricately. Informed by scientific knowledge and embellished with vivid imagery, the novel attests to the complicated relationship between the materiality of the brain, the thought processes that make it a mind, and personal experiences that emotionally charge them. It complicates the relationship between the body and the mind to ask broader questions. Is preserving the brain without the living body a form of immortality? Or, is it a confinement of the self into the closed space of an organ? While the former is a question of philosophical purview, the latter could be seen as a metaphor for a variety of pathological states.

Kaan Arslanoğlu, who has retired from practising medicine and has twelve novels to date, is the most politically inclined Turkish psychiatrist-novelist. With his strong leftist stance, he utilises science fiction to promote his ideological criticism based on the materialism of his evolutionary medical approach. For instance, his *Sessizlik Kuleleri 2084* (2007, *Towers of Silence 2084*) is a novel that explores advancements in biotechnologies in a way that is akin to Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and depicts a totalitarian future similar to George Orwell's *1984*. In the novel, a global catastrophe befalls on humanity and only a limited number of people are chosen to join the civilisation that shall be built. The story revolves around the narrator who is an ideal citizen and an inspector of the technologically and biologically perfected system. Her highly rational perspective and belief in the system's excellence are put to test at a job pursuing "the Man" who defies its requirements. With his death, she embarks on a journey to the margins of her ideal society, which instigates an inner journey of discovery that challenges her certainties.

In the depicted new civilisation, "human" aspects of humanity, such as memories and dreams, are considered obsolete. Neuroscientific technologies are used to fix moods, confusions, weaknesses, emotional vulnerabilities, and the like. The critique of the narrative is suggestive of an appreciation of the complexities of being human and the "glitches" that define personality. Essentially, Arslanoğlu presents the portrayed kind of scientifically perfected humanity as a bland uniformity. Although his portrayal of fixing people comes close to some of the disapproving perspectives that resist psychiatric medicine, the novelist's main concern seems to be authoritarian modes of governance, prioritising his political stance. He presents resistance to totalitarian eradication of diversity as being not only necessary but also natural.



Narratives of Fantasy

Suvin distinguishes the cognitive estrangement of science fiction from the non-cognitive estrangement of the fantastic along the lines of their relation to empiricism. He argues, for instance, that the folktale “does not use imagination as a means of understanding the tendencies latent in reality, but as an end sufficient unto itself and cut off from the real contingencies” (1979: 8). As such, the fantastic narratives are even further removed from reality since they create another world where things magically happen and the materialistic engagement with cognition is non-existent, even redundant. It could be argued that, then, with their choice of subject matter, the Turkish psychiatrist-novelists are increasingly distancing their narratives from conventional ideas of reality.

Allen Thiher notes, “The world of German romanticism was the last time, in our history, where doctors and poets, philosophers and scientists -often one and the same person- shared a unity of thought” (1999: 182). Both literature and medicine looked at the world as a totality and concern with the psyche was an interdisciplinary affair. The fantastic of the dream world, madness, and art were elements of a shared domain. As fantasy offered “compensation for the disjuncture between objective reality and the inner stage of representations,” madness had “the same power to produce representations as dream and art” (181). It might not be quite in the same calibre; however, psychic manifestations of the fantastic and the surreal are still critical matters for modern psychiatrists. Although laden with troubles, the extraordinary imaginative potential of the pathological mind maintains the lineage between the past and the present as such.

Fantastic alternatives to reality, maybe not always as the patients’ experiences themselves directly but through the evocations that result from engaging with them, find their way into the works of the Turkish psychiatrist-novelists. In fact, with its multifarious versions, fantasy is probably the most common element in their texts. Although there are several psychiatrist-novelists with works that fall into this category (including Levent Mete and Kaan Arslanoğlu), Engin Geçtan stands out because he utilises various fantastic elements in all his novels and he does so in unique ways each time. Geçtan, who has retired from medicine and has seven novels, is a very important name for Turkish psychiatry. He received his medical training in the 1950s, in New York City and invested his lifetime in developing psychiatric medicine in Turkey since his return in the 1960s. His novels are particularly interesting with their multiple interwoven narratives, experimental treatments of temporality, intriguing archetypical characterisations, and a strong sense of irony and witty humour.



Geçtan's first novel *Kırmızı Kitap* (1993, *The Red Book*) explores the boundaries of reality in a self-reflexive manner. It is a multi-layered narrative about a red book "that changes each time it is read" and the mysteries that surround it. It opens up with an enigmatic woman holding a red book. The narrator realises that he has seen a picture of the same woman in the newspaper and she is supposed to be dead. Soon after, it is revealed that their encounter is a scene from a film set. Yet, the same woman reappears in "real" life, pursued by shadowy men who are looking for a red book. Subsequently, the script of the film, the "real" lives of those involved with it, the actual red book itself, and the fantastic reality of its contents intermingle. Geçtan builds and fuses these various levels of reality to challenge their reliability and construct a curious storyline.

In this early novel, which he later revised and republished, the novelist playfully poses the idea of reality against fiction in a complex narrative-within-narrative structure. He further tests the seams of his fiction by the characters' consistent references to the "writer" of the text, acknowledging their own fictionality. Meanwhile, the textual style is also highly cinematographic in a manner that emulates the reality of the film within the novel. As a result, realities, stories, and their blurred boundaries are consistently shuffled, culminating in a captivating tale. Moreover, the mystery of the red book manifests itself as an extended metaphor for the unknowns of life. Geçtan challenges his characters about the meaning of life, inevitability of the ultimate end, and the choices made in the interim. This existentialist tendency in his storytelling later becomes a recurring component depicted from various viewpoints in all his literary works.

The multitude of realities and the equally numerous ways to approach them are staple elements of Geçtan's writing. He excels in destabilising temporal settings and upturning his characters' ordinary realities, while superimposing various layers over one another to achieve composite narratives. In *Bir Günlük Yerim Kaldı İster misiniz?* (1997, *I Have A Place For One Day Left, Would You Like It?*), for instance, he merges a folktale like narrative with a modern one. He zaps a young girl from a setting in old times into the life of a young man in modern times through an anachronic television that she finds in the hut of the village witch. As the young girl is thrown into the chaos of the modern world that she does not understand, another narrative layer with Jungian overtones about death appearing to people in the guise of an old woman and the devil lurking around in a mask coexist. Throughout the story, "the young girl of the folktale inadvertently weaves in and out of people's lives like a thread that stitches the different narrative patches to form the totality of the novel.



In a 2012 interview, Geçtan remarked that writing fiction provided him with an alternative to the somewhat limiting systematic nature of scientific thinking (Varlık 2012). With his diverse range of interests, he greatly benefits from the creative opportunities of literature, while he also challenges literary conventions. Not only psychoanalysis and existentialist psychiatry but also historical narratives of Istanbul and groundbreaking theories of physics enter his works to create extraordinary worlds and realities. Fiction becomes a playground for him to try how far and in what interesting ways the idea of reality can be pushed.

Kızarmış Palamutun Kokusu (2001, *The Scent of Fried Bonito*) challenges history as an objective reality, as its protagonist travels through time within the historical narratives of Istanbul, after a cursed object. Theoretical physics marks the storyline of *Tren* (2004, *The Train*) as parallel universes shift to overturn the already unreal lives of the characters. Quantum physics and the four dimensionality of time-space keeps the narrative of *Mesela Saat Onda* (2012, *For Instance at 10 O'clock*) together, at the expense of the characters in the hands of a trickster writer. In all these works, scientific knowledge instigates fantastic possibilities that reign freely in the narratives, whereby reality is downplayed in its ordinariness. Despite their references to science, however, the fascinating worlds Geçtan's works portray are mainly of the fantastic in a way that suggests his desire not to be limited too much by the necessity to maintain a scientific realism.

Conclusion

Our mind is the means through which we make sense of the world. If that function somehow falters, what we have is a perception of reality that is distorted at varying degrees. Being professionally preoccupied with such distortions, psychiatrists often encounter the boundaries of the real in their transgressed state. This engagement with transgression proves to be creatively suggestive for a number of Turkish psychiatrists who choose to explore the workings of the mind through literary narratives as well. Whether deemed a literary trend or an outcome of imaginative experiments against the systematism of science, the prevalence of the psychiatrist as a novelist in contemporary Turkish literature is an opportunity to rethink the medical professional as a creative personality.

The liminal nature of psychiatry straddling the realms of the body and the mind compels the psychiatrist to take into consideration personal narratives alongside possible pharmaceutical interventions. This aspect brings it closer to the world of creative writing than most other branches of medicine. Their comparable narrativistic components render the



relationship between psychiatry and literature meaningful and potentially beneficial for both sides. On the one hand, enriched by their particular expertise, the distinct ways in which the psychiatrist-novelists utilise creative writing to explore the boundaries of reality are unique contributions to the literary sphere. On the other hand, their involvement in creative fiction might engender novel approaches to reflect upon the faculties of the mind and the implications of narrativism in their professional field. The works of contemporary Turkish psychiatrist-novelists attest to the benefits of such cross-disciplinary encounters.

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