

Can the Tragic Also Be Feminist? An Essay on the Poetics of Crisis Narratives in the 1960s and 1970s*

Trajik Olan Feminist de Olabilir mi? 1960 ve 1970'lerdeki Kriz Anlatılarının Poetikası Üzerine Bir Deneme

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Abstract: This article explores the intricate relationship between the idea of the tragic and feminist discourse in the Turkish novel and examines three canonical novels in this respect. These novels are Nezihe Meriç's *Korsan Çıkmazı* (1961), Leylâ Erbil's *Tuhaf Bir Kadın* (1971), and Adalet Agaoğlu's *Ölmeye Yatmak* (1973), all three of which put female characters on center stage concerning Turkey's modernity project. By focusing on the representations of the urban femininities in these three novels through feminist narratology, the article first explores the connection between the self-actualization of female characters, the tragic, and the plot structure that recounts a story of an urban woman associated with Turkey's nationalist secular modernization project. Second, it scrutinizes how tragic thought is configured with the textual strategies and feminist discourse that challenge *the* modern Turkish woman imaginary constructed by this project. By analyzing how the human condition and its tragic manifestations are narrated in these novels, this essay examines whether the idea of the tragic generates a certain degree of feminist discourse in the Turkish novel or *vice versa*.

Keywords: the tragic, Turkish novel, Turkish modernity, crisis narratives

Özet: Bu makale, Türkçe romanda trajik düşünce ile feminist söylem arasındaki ilişkiyi kanonlaşmış üç romanı analiz ederek tartışmaktadır. Kadın karakterleri, Türkiye'nin modernleşme projesiyle ilintili olarak anlatılarının merkezine koyan bu romanlar sırasıyla Nezihe Meriç'in *Korsan Çıkmazı* (1961), Leylâ Erbil'in *Tuhaf Bir Kadın*'ı (1971) ve Adalet Agaoğlu'nun *Ölmeye Yatmak*'ıdır (1973). Bu kapsamda, ilk olarak romanlardaki kentli kadın temsillerine feminist anlatıbilim aracılığıyla odaklanılmakta, bu kadın kahramanların kendini gerçekleştirme, trajik düşünce ve Türkiye'nin ulusalcı seküler modernleşme projesiyle ilintili bir kadının hikayesine dayalı olay örgüsü arasındaki bağlantı tetkik edilmektedir. İkinci olarak, bu makale, romanlardaki trajik düşüncenin kurulumunu ve modernleşme projesi tarafından kurulan modern Türk kadını tahayyülünü sorgulayan feminist söylem ve metin stratejilerinin ilişkisini irdelemektedir. Böylece, bu makale her üç romandaki insanlık durumu ve bunun trajik tezahürlerinin nasıl anlatıldığını analiz ederken, Türkçe romanda trajik olanın belli bir derecede feminist bir söylem üretip üretmediğini veya bunun tam aksinin olup olmadığını incelemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: trajik olan, Türkçe roman, Türk modernitesi, kriz anlatıları

Many novels in Turkish literature configure the matter of the individual's downfall and the suffering it caused. This configuration slightly or self-consciously includes the idea of the tragic in various ways. The idea of the tragic configured in these novels is substantially related to the Ottoman-Turkish modernization process that began in the mid-nineteenth century. The tragic thought and its construction, in this sense, lie in the conflict of values in which mostly the urban individuals deal with existential struggles, moral dilemmas, or even intellectual contradictions in a certain period. There are various reasons for the conflict of values and thus the different existential or moral crises of the individuals caused by that conflict, depending on the socio-cultural, political, historical, and other dynamics of each period.

The way the urban individuals in westernizing Turkey have experienced the contradictions, ambiguities, and dualities of the modernity process since the 1920s becomes the main reason for the individual's crisis. In this respect, the existential crises, inner conflicts, and ethical dilemmas of many individuals reflect the complex interplay between self-realization of the subject, gender, national identity, and the secular values imposed by Turkey's top-down modernization program that defines the features of the Turkish modern in the strict sense. These crises and conflicts are narrated in and through innumerable Turkish novels; they are unavoidably entangled with the new socio-cultural norms of Turkey as a nation-state and its nationalist secular ethics.

In this article, I intend to explore how the so-called "modern Turkish women" are represented in relation to the tragic, self-realization, and the crisis of the modernity experience in three critically acclaimed novels written in the 1960s and the 1970s. These novels are Nezihe Meriç's *Korsan Çıkmaızı* (1961), Leylâ Erbil's *Tuhaf Bir Kadın* (*A Strange Woman*) (1971), and Adalet Ageoğlu's *Ölmeye Yatmak* (1973).¹ Examining this intricate relationship in detail helps us understand to what extent and how a feminist discourse can emerge from within the most fragile conflict, extremely vulnerable conditions, and even the idea of the tragic in literature. By doing so, the article may provide profound insights

¹ Only Erbil's novel has been translated into English. In the following pages, I keep using the original titles of these novels. However, I cite the quotes from the English translation of Erbil's novel. See Leylâ Erbil, *A Strange Woman*, trans. Nermin Menemencioglu and Amy Marie Spangler (Dallas: Deep Vellum Publishing, 2022).

into the interplay between the newly emergent feminist discourse at that time and tragic thought configured in the Turkish novel.

On the other hand, it would be too reductive to argue that such existential and ethical crises are solely caused by socio-political matters or cultural dualities concerning Turkish modernity because this approach would completely reject the agency of the individual and the direct responsibility of his or her action in a certain space and time. The crises of the urban individuals associated with the modernity experience convey, indeed, a major aspect of human existence in the localized context of Turkey, such as the way of being in the world, a quest for meaning in life, and ethical questions regarding them. All these aspects are variously manifest in many different Turkish novels over time. However, despite the newly emergent approaches and perspectives in Turkish literary studies, the complex relationship between the representations of the urban individual's crisis, the modernity experience, and gender has remained unexamined in terms of the tragic and its different manifestations in the Turkish novel.²

The Crisis Narratives

The three novels analyzed in this article convey the major characteristics of a dominant theme in the Turkish novel that occurred since its emergence. This theme relies on the modernity experiences of the different urban femininities or masculinities diversely narrated over time. In other words, these novels include the individual's existential and ethical crisis derived from the socio-cultural or even political aspects of Turkey's modernization. Let me call these kinds of novels the crisis narratives as a loose thematic category in the Turkish novel. These crisis narratives recount the story of young female or male characters' existential struggles and moral dilemmas associated with Turkey's socio-cultural and structural transformations in different modes. In this respect, they provide an intricate content of Turkey's modernization and its gender-centered dimension.

² Ahmet Evin slightly comments on some early Turkish novels by using the term tragedy loosely. See Ahmet Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1983), 56, 67, 220. For various approaches that examines the tragic in the Turkish novel, see also Vedi Aşkaroğlu, *Trajik ve Modern Triolojik Bir Çözümleme: Oğuz Atay - Joseph Conrad - Yusuf Atılgan* (Ankara: Kültür Ajans, 2016); Asiye Çığrı Yıldırım, *Servet-i Fünun Romanında Trajik Durum* (Ankara: Pegem Akademi, 2018); Alphan Akgül, *Kim Egemen Olabilir Yazgısına: Türk Romanında Trajedi ve Özgür İrade* (Ankara: Çolpan Kitap, 2021).

What makes these three novels crisis narratives is the embeddedness of the socio-historical context in the individual's crisis and *vice versa*. Each novel inhabits a story of a female protagonist in the historical, socio-cultural, and political conditions in Turkey between the 1930s and the late 1960s. In this respect, each protagonist conveys strikingly common characteristic features. They all represent middle-class, well-educated, Western-oriented, slightly intellectual, modern urban women recently living either in Istanbul or Ankara, who are confused and wounded figures due to the unresolved conflict with the social norms and their moral values, to a certain extent.

The prominence of gender and its close link with sexuality and modernness is quite apparent in each novel and plays a vital role in designating its narrative discourse and texture. In this respect, these crisis narratives raise several important questions in explicit or implicit ways: To what extent the modernity experience lead to the emergence of tragic thought in the non-Western context, say, particularly in the case of the modern Turkish novel? Or can these novels be evaluated as the reconsideration of the tragic in the specific context of Turkey? In which ways the tragic configured in the novels can be discussed concerning the modernity experience and gender? (How) can a feminist discourse emerge from the articulation of the tragic in the Turkish novel? By attempting to seek answers to these vital questions, the textual analysis in this article focuses majorly on the plot structure, the character's resisting (feminist) voice, and narrative discourse in the three novels. These novels problematize the certain norms of the idealized, singular urban femininity in Turkey, that is, the image of modern Turkish woman envisaged by the Republican ideology in the 1920s and 1930s.

The three novels are written by three different female authors who are, indeed, members of the first-generation women of modern Turkey after its establishment as a nation-state in 1923. That is to say, Meriç (1925), Agaoğlu (1929), and Erbil (1931) were born in the early years of westernizing Turkey and educated by the mindset of its top-down nationalist modernization program that initiated rationalist, progressivist, and secular agenda with radical reforms on a wide range of subjects and realms.³ In other words, these writers are women, who are assigned female at birth, that experienced themselves both the emancipation of the women in the public sphere and the limitation and singularity of

³ For a brief discussion about these reforms in Turkey, see Erik J. Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 186-195.

the modern female identity in Turkey. This double experience of the writers constitutes a paradox for many urban women in Turkey as well. Each novel can be arguably evaluated as a different attempt to cope with this paradox by challenging the image of the modern Turkish women and its discourse either self-consciously or unwittingly.

Despite the brief information about these authors mentioned, this article does not focus on any biographical aspect of the authors, and it also rejects the gendered authorship and its essentialist terminology, such as "women's language" and "feminine writing" as the gendered authorship has been quite problematic, reductive, and essentialist.⁴ However, it is worth mentioning that these three prominent authors were arguably the first ones who problematized the image of the so-called modern Turkish women and its masculinist dimension by using inventive narrative techniques, textual strategies, and experimental formalist features in a broad sense. In other words, these three novels contributed to contravening both the discursive limits of *the* modern Turkish femininity and the narrative conventions of the realist and the so-called national literature, to a great extent.

Each crisis narrative then contains a certain kind of feminist discourse, or at least, a resistant female voice against the singularity of *the* modern Turkish woman constructed in parallel with Turkey's modernization. The objection to this singularity, indeed, bears on the idea of the tragic in the novels and leads to pursuing new ways of literary expression, both formalistically and discursively. Each novel offers a new mode of representing the modernistic femininities in the Turkish novel. At this point, two crucial aspects need explanation. First, as the objects of this article are only these three novels, the textual analysis focuses only on "the gender of the text[s]" instead of the author's sex.⁵ On the other

⁴ There is unavoidably a canon of women's writing in national literatures. However, the idea of *female* writing or the notion of *feminine* writing is quite problematic due to its inherent gender essentialism. For a discussion about it, see Kari Weil, "French Feminism's *écriture féminine*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory*, ed. Ellen Rooney (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 164 and Toril Moi, "Feminist, Female, Feminine," in *The Feminist Reader Essays in Gender and the Politics of Literary Criticism*, ed. Catherine Belsey and Jane Moore (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 131.

⁵ Nancy Armstrong, "What Feminism Did to Novel Studies," in *The Cambridge Companion*, 122. The feminist writing indeed deconstructs, or at least, criticizes the masculine mindset and discourse from an "anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist position" perspective. See also Moi, "Feminist," 131.

hand, the emergent representations of the Turkish femininities in relation to gender and sexuality after the 1950s varied and increased due to both the incremental publications of many female authors and their different experimental approaches to literature in all genres, particularly the short story and novel.⁶ In this respect, there is an explicit relationship between the women's literature and the new narrative modes, and that between tragic thought and gender in the Turkish novel.

Many different literary texts and narratives produced by various writers including Meriç, Agaoglu, and Erbil tend to problematize the singular female identity imposed by Turkey's nationalist, secular modernization program and its paradoxical features. These novels thematize the suppressed sexuality of women and the body practices concerning the historical and discursive construction of the ideal image of modern Turkish women. During the 1920s and the 1930s, Turkey's modernization project constructed its vision of the modernness and national identity relating them to the public visibility of women in Turkey. This discursive and socio-political construction intended to emancipate the Turkish women from religious and any traditional conventions literally and symbolically, thereby creating the "new woman" of westernizing Turkey after 1923 as an ideal image in a similar way the modern woman discourse emerged in Europe.⁷ The "new women" in the context of Turkey denotes the phrase

⁶ It is important to mention that Turkish literature, including classical Ottoman poetry and folk literature, contains a high degree of eroticism, same-sex relations, unorthodox division of gender, and sexuality in general. For the representations of these matters, see Irvin Cemil Schick, "Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Ottoman and Turkish Literature," *The Turkish Association Journal* 28, no. 1/2 (2004): 81-103 and Walter G. Andrews and Mehmet Kalpaklı, *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁷ For a comprehensive discussion about the cultural reforms and socio-political vision of Turkish modernity regarding women and gender, see Nermin Abadan-Unat, "Social Change and Turkish Women," in *Women in Turkish Society*, ed. Nermin Abadan-Unat (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1981), 5-31. For the feminist critique of the masculinist vision and its implementations in Turkey's modernization, see Serpil Sancar, *Türk Modernleşmesinin Cinsiyeti* (Istanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 2012), 81-189. The "New Woman" is not limited to Turkish modernity in the first decades of the twentieth century. On the contrary, "the New Woman was to become a resonant symbol of emancipation" in Europe at that time. See Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1995), 14.

"Republican women" or "modern Turkish women" that defines modern, secular, educated urban women in a Western-style manner and look. The three terms, "Republican women," "modern Turkish women" and "new women" in Turkey are interchangeably used in this article. This use, however, does not agree with the singularity of Turkish female identity, but it reflects the modern Turkish woman discourse and its historical connotation concerning Turkey's modernization and its socio-cultural and historical background.

The textual analysis in this article therefore focuses particularly on the female protagonist and plot construction of each novel, paying attention to the female voices of the novels. On the other hand, the ontology of the fictional characters and their mimetic resemblances to reality are not considered in the analysis. Accordingly, the analysis of the novels employs the narrative theory, particularly feminist narratology conceptualized by Susan Lanser. Feminist narratology helps to analyze the texts from a feminist perspective and focuses on not only the female characters but how they are positioned in the plot and story, considering the other narrative elements and textual strategies, such as plot, narrative voice, narrator, and metaphors.⁸ The use of feminist narratology functions to closely investigate some narrative techniques and styles that configure the idea of the tragic and even its ironic and parodic modes in these three novels. This methodical approach then reveals the interplay between the content, theme, and structure of each novel, and the analysis can therefore explore the representations of the female characters by linking their existential or ethical crises, the tragic configuration, and the gender discourse of Turkey's modernization project to the narrative modes and styles employed in the novels. This way of reading these texts rather positions these novels in terms of feminist writing and the subversive poetics of the critique in the Turkish novel.⁹

⁸ Susan S. Lanser, "Towards a Feminist Narratology," *Style* 20, 3 (Fall 1986): 341-363. Lanser develops her approach that fills the gap between feminism and narratology comprehensively. See also Susan Snaider Lanser, *Fictions of Authority: Women Writers and Narrative Voice* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 3-41 and "Queering Narrative Voice," *Textual Practice* 32, no. 6 (2018): 923-937.

⁹ While using a feminist lens and the comparative reading of the three novels, it is necessary to explain my self-position and the limits of the study before beginning to analyze the novels. To analyze these novels based on the matters discussed above by considering the emergence of feminist poetics in the modern Turkish novel, it is inherently useful to take a feminist position not only as

Modernity, Gender, and the so-called Female Bildung

The far-reaching process of Westernization and modernization in Turkey went hand in hand with that of the nation-building and secularization that generated new symbolic and performative practices of the Turkish women in a contemporary sense by which the Turkish state ideology was officially promoted. In Turkey, state feminism beginning from the 1920s was implied in the name of modernization, which made the woman a “symbol of the new state.”¹⁰ That is to say, there is a complex interplay between the conception of the “new woman,” national identity, gender, and the symbols of modernness in Turkey. This intricate relationship has been unavoidably manifested in the Turkish novel through the representations of mostly different female characters —as the Turkish femininities.

Many novels, like the three novels analyzed here, tell the stories of different urban femininities and more generally the so-called female *Bildung* in the context of Turkey. *Bildung* as a literary term that originates from German literature generally refers to the combination of “both planned education and independent self-realization” that underlines “a state of unity” involving the harmony between the inner self and the external world.¹¹ By considering the socio-historical and cultural aspects of Turkey’s modernization process and its

a theoretical approach and methodology but also as a self-conscious way of writing this paper. In other words, having a careful, non-dualistic, and feminist language within the academic writing style and concepts used in this study itself matters. This awareness during the analysis plays as much a crucial role as the method of this article. In this respect, two main points need to be explained. I have written this paper from a feminist male perspective – I have been assigned male at birth and have since identified as a man, which may be limited, to some extent. However, this limitation does not necessarily prevent a feminist approach in general and the analysis of the novels in this direction as the kernel of the research conveys a feminist way of reading the novels. Second, I take an explicit distance from the strict definition of Turkishness and any other singularity of identity. This study includes a feminist approach that displays an appreciative feminist reading, which is also the ethical component of this study and its method.

10 Jenny B. White, “State Feminism, Modernization, and the Turkish Republican Woman,” *NWSA Journal* 15, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 149.

11 Klaus Vondung, “German Nationalism and the Concept of ‘Bildung’,” in *Romantic Nationalism in Europe*, ed. J. C. Eade (Canberra: Humanities Research Centre, Australian University, 1983), 136. See also Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World the Bildungsroman in European Culture* (London: Verso, 1987), 5- 26.

progressivist, rationalist epistemology regarding modernness, *Bildung*, here, refers to a process of being a Western-oriented, urban Turkish woman within the limited and given definition of the modern, which was constructed by the top-down Republican mindset and its socio-cultural reforms.

This highly problematic and one-sided way of being in the world and particularly of becoming modern in Turkey indicates the struggles of the urban women as exemplary nationalist, well-behaved, modern Turkish citizens who are required to learn, practice, and therefore forcibly or voluntarily internalize all the values and manners of this given identity. The female characters of the three novels also convey certain behavioral patterns, bodily manners, social gestures, and dressing styles, which is to say that there is a performative necessity of secular politics to be an urban, modern, and Republican woman in westernizing Turkey, which is discursively and aesthetically problematized in the novels, to a certain degree.

To put it bluntly, the terminological use of *Bildung* in this article does not claim a positive meaning or direction as in the use of nineteenth-century European novels. Instead, *Bildung* points to the image of the idealized Turkish women and its discourse in relation to the modernity experience in Turkey. It is mainly the contradictions of this image that lead to the inner conflict of the female protagonist in each novel. The paradox of the modern Republican woman discourse, then, forms tragic thought in the novels, and each of which approaches constructs the tragic differently.

The variations of the modern urban Turkish women are depicted —concerning national identity, secularism, and modernity experience— in numerous serialized and published novels until the 1940s, including popular literature and other genres.¹² The state feminism and the implications of the socio-cul-

¹² Even before the Republican era, several prominent male authors, such as Namık Kemal, Şemsettin Sami, and Ahmet Mithat paid attention to the issues related to women's status and position in the Ottoman-Turkish in their novels published from the 1870s onwards. However, the depiction of Ottoman-Turkish women in literature until the 1900s remained limited in terms of the number of female characters and content. Moreover, women were represented as "powerless and passive victims of a system" that led to "unwanted marriages" and "the degradation of polygyny, unilateral divorce, and particularly slavery." See Deniz Kandiyoti, "Slave Girls, Temptresses, and Comrades: Images of Women in the Turkish Novel," *Feminist Studies* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1988): 38. See also Çimen Günay-Erkol, "Osmanlı-Türk Romanından

tural reforms in Turkey that started in the 1920s highlighted the equality and emancipation of women in various fields from education and law to social life. The definition of *the* new Turkish woman is, however, limited to an urban representative of “the modern, secular, Westernized state” as women were “expected to behave and dress in what the state defined as a modern, Western manner.”¹³ This singularity and its bodily practices remained dominant without being questioned, or at least, openly criticized within the Turkish novel until the 1950s.¹⁴ Many literary works, especially those written by the new generation of female authors of the 1950s, just as the authors of the three novels examined here, began to problematize the image of the Republican woman and its masculinist construction, thus troubling the singularity of modern Turkish female identity with either semi-consciously or unwittingly feminist discourse and its writing practices.

Çağdaş Türk Romanına Kadınlık: Değişim ve Dönüşüm,” *Türkiyat Mecmuası* 21, no. 2 (Güz 2011): 159. The second image of the Turkish women in the novels inhabits the stories of the urban, cosmopolitan, *a la Franca* female individuals who break the traditional social practices and masculine moral norms, resulting in their social, individual, and moral downfall in life. From the 1910s onward, Turkish women are depicted as national fighters with a pure love of, and eternal devotion to, the nation. The female characters in Halide Edib’s novels, such as *Yeni Turan* (1912), *Handan* (1912), *Ateşten Gömlek* (1922), and *Vurun Kahpeye* (1923) define this kind of the “Turkish woman” in the nationalist context, which adds a positive layer to the representation of the women in literature with a feminist agency. For the impact of Halide Edib’s literature on the feminist discourse in Turkey, see Ayşe Durakbaşa, *Halide Edib: Türk Modernleşmesi ve Feminizm* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2000). However, the popular literature in the early Republican era conveys the nationalist discourse through love stories, melodramas, and detective novels. For instance, Aka Gündüz’s highly popular best-seller novel *Dikmen Yıldızı* (1927) inhabits a love story and the mental rehabilitation of the female protagonist thanks to her awareness of national identity and contributions to the independence war in the early 1920s. This novel remained popular in the 1930s. For analysis of the female characters as the gang leaders and its relation to nationalist idea in many detective novels, see Seval Şahin, *Cinai Meseleler: Osmanlı-Türk Polisiye Edebiyatında Biçim ve İdeoloji (1884–1928)* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2017), 162–183.

13 White, “State Feminism,” 145–146.

14 There are many neglected novels published in the 1930 and 1940s that variously depict the women of Turkey although they do not problematize this aspect explicitly. For instance, Safiye Erol’s *Kadıköyü’nün Romanı* (1938) and *Ülker Fırtınası* (1944) do not necessarily affirm the asexuality of women. On the contrary, they contain eroticism, women’s open relationship with men, and sexual desire, to varying degrees.

The three novels analyzed here also question the restricted meaning and features of *the* Turkish female identity and its close link with the modernness, national identity, gender, and self-actualization of each protagonist. In this respect, the story of each female character problematizes the symbolic gestures and performative acts of the idealized, nationalist "new woman" in Turkey, to some extent. The critical approach against the given features of the singular way of being a modern Turkish woman and its gender discourse gained fresh and semi-consciously feminist momentum in the 1960s and the 1970s along with the leftist ideology and the liberation movement of 1968. Not only do the representations of the marginalized, rebellious, or discordant female characters in the Turkish novel begin to appear, but also various resisting voices that may be called feminist become prominent in the stories and plotlines of several novels. This double development regarding the representations of women in the Turkish novel gradually leads to the emergence of unnamed feminist writing with innovative techniques and subversive textual strategies.¹⁵

Secularization plays a crucial role in defining the image of the modern Republican woman and its striking features in Turkey since the 1920s. Nilüfer Göle points out that secularism became the "precondition" for modern Turkish female identity in the understanding of Turkey's state feminism.¹⁶ The female characters in the three novels represent the secular urban women of Turkey living between the 1930s and the late 1960s in the plots and embody a social type—middle-class, slightly intellectual, young urban woman—in this context. These characters perform bodily practices and discourses in Istanbul or Ankara. The symbolic and performative acts of the urban femininities repetitively produce "the images of women that became central to the iconography of the regime" in Turkey.¹⁷ This iconicity, then, makes these female protagonists a measurement tool for the success of Turkey's modernization. Moreover, these novels problematize the female

¹⁵ For a recently published study that focuses on women's writing and the emergence of feminist discourse in Turkish literature in that period, see Duygu Çayıroğlu, *Kadınca Bilmeyişlerin Sonu: 1960-1980 Döneminde Feminist Edebiyat* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2022), 12-15; 77-181.

¹⁶ Nilüfer Göle, *Mühendisler ve İdeoloji* (Istanbul: Metis, 2016), 87.

¹⁷ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Gendering the Modern on Missing Dimensions in the Study of Turkish Modernity," in *Rethinking Modernity and National Identity in Turkey*, ed. Sibel Bozdoğan and Reşat Kasaba (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 125.

characters' learning process of the secular "agency and imagination"¹⁸ generated by Turkey's state feminism that dictates the adaptation to new public spaces and the emulation of Western-style body techniques as a lifestyle and manners.

As a result, the construction of the urban Turkish femininities with a highly emphasized secular contour lies in the performative acts both in private and public life that produce the singularity of Turkish female identity and its modernness in Turkey. This aspect becomes a significant matter in the novels as the self-actualization of each female character is directly related to that aspect. As Judith Butler argues, "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency," and just as in the case of Turkish modernity, the female identity is "instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*"¹⁹ in the public sphere, relating to Turkishness and the features of the modern Republican woman imaginary imposed by Turkey's nationalist modernization project. Secular acts and speeches, therefore, manifest a series of internalized performative body techniques and the language of this dominant discourse as a way of socialization and for the condition of the visibility of the women in public space.²⁰

Tragic Thought as the Outcome of the Modernity Experience

Many crisis narratives indeed inhabit the traumatic and tragic manifestations of the urban individuals who seek self-fulfillment and meaning in life. However, the character of the novels does not properly succeed in the so-called *Bildung*. In this sense, there is no lasting reconciliation between their desires and the ideals of Turkey's nationalist secular modernization program that lies in the socio-cultural concerns and the priority of the nation. This point is where the conflict of values emerges due to various reasons, depending on the story and plot of each novel. Each protagonist's conflict of values constitutes the source of the tragic in each novel, and tragic thought indicates the characteristic of the instability, crisis, and paradox not only in the individuals but also in society on the whole.

The idea of the tragic, then, bears on the lack of a reconciled idea of *Bildung* in the context of modern Turkey and that of its epistemological and ethical

18 Nilüfer Göle, *Seküler ve Dinsel: Aşınan Sınırlar* (Istanbul: Metis, 2012), 55.

19 Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519.

20 Göle, *Seküler ve Dinsel*, 55.

foundations. In other words, there is neither a philosophical or ethical base nor a socio-cultural manifestation of the reconciliation between the individual and the community in these novels. the tragic is directly related to the individual's modernity experience itself and relies on the tension where the agency of the female individual begins and where it ends. In this line of thought, it can even be argued that the tragic as a condition is an unavoidable outcome of this modernity experience that also becomes its epitome in the Turkish novel.

In her stimulating article on the Turkish *Bildungsroman*, Meltem Gürle emphasizes that "the Turkish formation story almost never closes with a transformation that offers reconciliation between the individual and society" as the characters in many novels are unable to transcend their ideals because the ideal is always too abstract to hold.²¹ Their ideals, however, are the manifestations of the modernity experience narrated in the novels, and these individual experiences contain the contradictions, ambiguities, and dilemmas of the voluntary or forced process of Turkey's modernization over decades. In this respect, the nucleus of the tragic arises from within the modernity experience of each individual. Moreover, the tension that forms tragic thought is not solely between the individual and the society but also within the self. The conflict in the novels is, therefore, both external and internal. In other words, there is an inner conflict and a certain form of self-confrontation the character deals with. Due to this self-questioning, the character's crisis or conflict differs from melodrama and its mode of excessive sentimentalism and hopelessness. Each character's growing crisis and the way it is narrated in the novels also raises a question about the intricate relationship between socio-cultural structures, individual agency, moral responsibility, destiny, fate, and even contingency. It is therefore crucial to trace how the tragic idea and its elements are constructed in the Turkish novel, depending on the three novels analyzed here.

21 Meltem Gürle, "Wandering on the Peripheries: The Turkish Novelistic Hero as 'Beautiful Soul'," *Journal of Modern Literature* 36, no. 4 (Summer 2013): 98. Gürle's point of reference is based on the epistemology of *Bildung* that is derived from German philosophy and literature. This line of argument therefore may be problematic in terms of the dynamic relationship between the Turkish novel and the modernity experiences in Turkey, especially as long as each story of individual growth is seen as a *Bildung* story. For the similar tendency to consider wide variety of the novels and categorize them *Bildungsroman* in a loose way, see Jale Parla, *Türk Romanında Yazar ve Başkalaşım* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2011), 110. See also Hasan Bülent Kahraman, *Türkiye'de Yazınsal Bilincin Oluşumu* (Istanbul: Kapı Yayınları, 2014), 18.

Despite George Steiner's well-known claim regarding the death of tragedy in European literature and cultural tradition in the twentieth century, many prominent studies published previously and recently discuss not only the validity and commonality of the tragic in the modern sense but also its presence beyond drama, especially in the novel. From this point, many novels convey the idea of the tragic and its various configurations in their plots, stories, and narrative discourses, to varying degrees.²² While analyzing different aspects of tragedy in modern literature, Terry Eagleton underlines the possibility and importance of the tragic idea as "being a question of crisis" that "can be surely quite as much a condition as an event, which lends it to novelization remarkably well."²³ I propose to extend this argument by considering the tragic configured in the context of non-Western modernity and another literary tradition, just as in the case of Turkish modernity and the Turkish novel.

The tragic configuration, in this sense, exists in many Turkish novels that recount the story of a young protagonist who struggles to find self-identity and meaning, and therefore, has an inner conflict between his or her self-fulfillment and the national ideals of westernizing Turkey. This inner conflict leads to a state of deep existential crisis and later the questioning of own way of being in the world and its ethics in the setting of Turkey. The self-confrontation of the characters then causes different forms of suffering and sorrow because of what he or she has done, lost, or missed in life. The tragic and its elements in the

²² There are innumerable examples in this respect. For tragedy in the nineteenth century European novels, see Sidney Zink, "The Novel as a Medium of Modern Tragedy," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 17, no. 2 (December 1958): 171 and John Snyder, *Prospects of Power: Tragedy, Satire, the Essay, and the Theory of Genre* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 83-84. For the tragic idea in the Victorian novel, see Jeannette King, *Tragedy in the Victorian Novel Theory and Practice in the Novels of George Eliot, Thomas Hardy and Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1-16. For tragedy in the modernist European novel, see Manya Lempert, *Tragedy and the Modernist Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978); Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence the Idea of Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2003); Ato Quayson, *Tragedy and Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021). Clifford Leech argues that novels like Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1856), Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), and Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1875-76) have the features of tragedy, but they are not tragedies but "tragic novels." See Clifford Leech, *Tragedy* (London: Methuen & Co, 1969), 31.

²³ Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 201.

novels —the crisis narratives— may be embedded in the story and narrated in different modes. For instance, Safiye Erol's *Ülker Fırtınası* (1944) Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's *Huzur* (1949), and Oğuz Atay's *Tutunamayanlar* (1972) or *Tehlikeli Oyunlar* (1973) can be considered in this context.²⁴ Whatever the main story is, there also exists a gender dimension of the existential crisis and its conflict represented in these novels.

In this respect, the crises of the women —various female characters or different femininities— in many novels contain the idea of the tragic as an unavoidable conflict of values, associating the female protagonist's existential struggle or ethical dilemma with the different aspects of Turkey's modernization and the effects of its radical reforms: westernization, national identity, the new life in Turkey and its secular ethics, and so on. While the female protagonist in each novel analyzed in this article tackles an existential question and a moral dilemma entangled with the nationalist context of Turkey in the 1960s or the 1970s, the representations of their inner conflicts constitute several dichotomies and tensions between free will and agency; coincidence, fate, and destiny; the individual and the community; the internal and the external; modernity and tradition in specific manners.

These dichotomies designate a paradox, and the tragic in the novels occurs as "the conflict between an individual and the forces that destroy"²⁵ these heroines. That is to say, the middle-class, Western-oriented, intellectual, urban individuals in Turkey deal with the multiple conflicts of values. Tragic thought lies in the various conflicts between the protagonists' idealism, ethics, and the socio-economic or cultural realities of Turkey at that time, involving ambiguity, coincidence, destiny, and the individual's agency beyond the East-West contradiction. The different aspects of human existence and the question regarding the way of being in the world coincide with the modern condition in Turkey and its existential, ethical, and epistemological implications.

The protagonist of *Korsan Çıkmazı*, Meli, bravely asks a crucial question to herself, rejecting the masculinist pressure of the society on her life: "Why? Why does such a bad coincidence, the backwardness of the society reverse my

24 For a detailed analysis of the tragic in Atay's *Tehlikeli Oyunlar*, see Yasin Sofuoğlu "Tragic Thought in Oğuz Atay's *Tehlikeli Oyunlar*: Identity, Culture, and History" (Master's thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2019).

25 Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1966), 87.

life?”²⁶ In a comparable way, Nermin, the main character of *Tuhaf Bir Kadın* talks to some male authors in a restaurant and provocatively explains her opinions to them: “Today, I know all of you, each and every one. I’ve seen with my very own eyes the anguish that the Turkish intellectuals suffer! I’ve learned how they view women.”²⁷ Apart from these two bold statements that reject the suppressed position of the Turkish women, Aysel, the protagonist of *Ölmeye Yatmak* touches upon the same matter while asking herself at the threshold of committing suicide in the plot: “Have I ever been myself?”²⁸ Each statement voiced by these protagonists reflects a certain experience of life and its outcome as a slightly late recognition in the novels. Each protagonist’s self-awareness, along with sadness, disillusionment, and despair, then, requires an in-depth examination to understand her resisting voice or rebellious attitude, emotional and mental suffering, as well as self-confrontation, great endurance, and the feminist discourse in the center of the tragic consciousness in each novel.

The presence of the tragic as an inevitable condition of conflict and crisis raises a question about being an urban, intellectual, Western-oriented Turkish woman by considering the nationalist context of modern Turkishness and its gender dimension. The socio-cultural specificity of the tragic reflected in and through the Turkish novel also conveys an aspect of human nature, which raises a more general question of what it is to be a human, particularly a female individual in the world at times of such dramatic changes and serious socio-cultural or political crises. The idea of the tragic, either in its ancient insight or in contemporary understanding, therefore, involves both specific and general dimensions of human values, ethics, and “the question of existence,” as Richard B. Sewall highlights it.²⁹ Moreover, tragic thought let us meditate on how people respond

26 Nezihe Meriç, *Korsan Çıkması* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi, 1999), 131. All the quotes from the novel are translated by me.

27 Leylâ Erbil, *A Strange Woman*, 84. For the original quote in Turkish, see Leylâ Erbil, *Tuhaf Bir Kadın* (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası, 2011), 62.

28 Adalet Agaoğlu, *Ölmeye Yatmak/Dar Zamanlar* (Istanbul: Everest, 2018), 191. Just as *Korsan Çıkması*, this novel has not been translated into English yet. I translate all the quotes from the novel.

29 Richard B. Sewall, *The Vision of Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980), 4. For the contemporary interpretation of the tragic, see also Eagleton, *Sweet Violence*, 21 and Miriam Leonard, *Tragic Modernities* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015), 12.

to an inner conflict, a moral ambiguity, failure, and intense suffering due to personal flaws or uncontrollable reasons beyond the individual's agency, and sometimes unjust pain and human affliction. Some of these responses and the way of they are narrated in the novels of Meriç, Erbil, and Agaoglu designate the relation between the tragic and feminist discourse in the Turkish novel.

The Fragmented Selves, the Episodic Plot Structures

In these three novels, the heroines tend to internalize the given national values and manners in their adolescence, but the problems they encounter primarily manifest the variations of the social pressure on women, the so-called traditional practices, and the masculinist discourse of the secular modernization in Turkey. In other words, these protagonists do not recognize the major cause of the structural problems of Turkey's modernization and its link with the masculinist construction of the singular female identity, which is implied as the only way for being modern in Turkey.

Each novel contains a non-linear story and fragmentary narrative structure, and each protagonist gradually comes to realize the disturbing matter(s) of her modernity experience in this fragmented plot construction. There are different kinds of existential crises or moral dilemmas with which each heroine deals after a certain event or an epiphany that triggers her self-questioning. The main plot-line of the novels then lies in the self-confrontation of the female protagonists who either revise their lives and significant actions in the form of flashbacks or involuntary memories that grasp the time-space of a particular event or even a feeling. In the recent time of the plot, the protagonists are in their mid-thirties or early forties and mostly stay in a single room while thinking of their lives — mistakes, flaws, and failures. The spatial feature and the narrative logic of the self-confrontation in each novel designate the inner conflict due to the combination of the external conditions and the protagonist's response to that, which may include coincidence beyond free will, agency, and even destiny. The configuration of the tragic in the novels relies upon the conflict within the story and its narrative logic. However, the ways the tragic and its conflict are narrated are fragmented, situational, and unusual, rather than united, actional, and conventional.

For instance, *Korsan Çıkması* narrates the story of two close friends, Meli and Berni in the 1960s in episodic manners. While Meli and Berni are two se-

parate first-person narrators of the novel, an unknown external narrator depicts the events and conditions in the third person, even including Meri and Berni's feelings in the narrative. The novel includes the childhood memories of both characters and the impact of their old female relative Neyyire on them as a role model who raised Meli and Berni, teaching them social codes, morals, daily practices, and family values in the early Republican period. After a while, Meli moves to Istanbul for her university education and starts living alone. In the narrative, Meli's conscious modernity experience, indeed, begins with her life in the city and the close encounters with both the social realities of Turkey at that time and the practices of the nationalist secular modernization.

Meli's "education" through her experience of the new life in the urban setting goes towards her education to be a modern Turkish woman and well-mannered citizen of her country. This education relies on two major aspects: education by family and university. The importance of both aspects is underlined by Meli as the main character and the external narrator throughout the novel. However, while Meli finds herself in a scandalous situation that derives from a terrible misunderstanding, she begins to question herself, her life, and particularly the masculinist values of society. Her friend Ahmet, who is engaged in the left-wing politics of the period, gets sick in her place suddenly. While Meli takes care of him, with an old Levantine lady in her room, coincidentally the police come there to arrest Ahmet when he lies on a bed as he is a suspect in a political crime. This event becomes a subject of gossip in Meli's environment and her work and thus brings about the matters of chastity and sexual desire. Meli finds herself in a misunderstood situation in which she has to explain that they had no affair.

The effect of that event causes Meli's mental breakdown and her resentment towards society and its moral values regarding gender and women's sexuality. The narrative construction of the novel shows how Meli copes with the social pressure and the malicious gossip about her, as well as to what extent she could overcome the dramatic effect of that misunderstanding that happened many years ago. Due to Meli's sleeping problem, mental uneasiness, and the fragility of her emotions, the reader may understand that she has been still wounded and suffering from the consequences of that incident. In other words, her way of being in the world insomuch as narrated in the novel turns into a process of constant suffering and struggle for her human dignity, to some extent. Her

self-questioning gains a more constructive dimension as she decides to devote herself to the education of her young students for a better society whose female members also can think and act freely. On the other hand, her sincere and idealistic commitment to education, indeed, affirms the emancipation politics of women in Turkey since the 1920s by indicating its failure because the masculinist mindset and its practices are still at work.

In the next example, *Tuhaf Bir Kadın* possesses a quite different narrative pattern of the tragic. The novel is comprised of four independent chapters. In chapter one, the reader reads the diary of a young rebel university student Nermin written between 1950 and 1952. Fragmentary notes from Nermin's diary tell her growth in Istanbul, involving her concerns about sexuality, the never-ending pressure of her mother, her relations with various male and female friends, and the sexist literary milieu. At that time, despite her melancholic mood, the reader may comprehend that Nermin as a young woman unconsciously accepted the values and manners of the singular modern urban female identity and its daily practices in the setting of the 1950s, seeing that role as freedom and modernness for herself in still-westernizing Turkey.

The last chapter in the novel depicts Nermin, who is recently almost at the age of forty, revising her past in a luxury ski hotel room. In this chapter, Nermin re-evaluates her past at present, which implies the period of the late 1960s, her actions, her engagement with the communist party and politics in Turkey, and her relations with the other people as an intellectual. Contrary to the first-person narration of Nermin, in this chapter, there is an unknown external narrator who describes Nermin's acts in the hotel room. On the other hand, Nermin's past acts and inner thoughts are depicted through a stream of consciousness technique. This way of constructing her conflict between the past and present slightly resembles the way Meli's inner thoughts and emotions are represented. Nermin confronts her ideological values, her marriage, and all her actions. She self-critically questions her acts narrated through involuntary memories and flashbacks, which also include a certain degree of irony and self-referential parody.

Although both novels seemingly convey some narrative features of the *Bildungsroman*, considering a story of growth and conflict with society, the self-actualization of both protagonists does not occur in the way they find har-

mony between their ideals, desire, and the realities of society in Turkey. Their self-actualization is not complete in the plots at all; they question both their self-identity and the role of the social environment on their self-formation. This point is where the tragic gradually occurs in the novels through the inner conflict and self-confrontation that reveal the moments of the existential crisis and moral questioning of self and community.

The common pattern of self-questioning gains a more crucial dimension in the third example, *Ölmeğe Yatmak*, because this aspect determines the plot construction and narrative discourse of the novel as a whole. The novel recounts the story of Aysel's confrontation with herself while she lies on the bed of a fancy hotel room, which explicitly resembles the last chapter of *Tuhaf Bir Kadın*. The narration of Aysel's self-confrontation, however, lies in both the depiction of her individual life story and that of the socio-cultural and political conditions of the long period between the late 1930s and the 1960s. The interpenetration of the individual issues and the social matters in the novel, therefore, constructs a dialectical narrative mode that also employs the fragments from newspapers, radio broadcasts, and historical incidents in a documentary-like way. This mode includes two different narrative frames and different storytelling techniques.

The primary story includes the recent actions, monologues, and inner thoughts of Aysel who lies in a bed in the early morning of a day in April 1968. The second narrative frame tells the crucial phases of Aysel's growth concerning Turkey's modernization process, including her relations with the other characters between 1938 and 1968 that reveal the socio-economic and cultural realities in Turkey, including diary notes of a male character, the letters written by different characters. Apart from being a title of the novel, *ölmeğe yatmak*, lying down to die refers to a double meaning since the beginning: an act of Aysel's potential suicide that has been repetitively suspended and the instrumentalization of this act to reveal the socio-political, cultural, economic conditions of Turkey over decades, which determined the trajectory of Aysel's life. Aysel's present crisis indeed hinges on the crisis of her generation in the plot structure. In this way, the representation of Aysel's existential struggle along with an explicit moral concern is combined with the documentary-like, historicizing, multivoiced narrative mode. Her inner conflict, then, turns into a dialectic story that problematizes the definition and values of the ideal of modern Republican woman

and its discourse constructed in 1920s Turkey, relating them to the gender, class, and cultural politics of Turkey's nationalist modernization time.

There is, however, a significant point to be emphasized here, which is valid for the three novels. This point is the individual responsibility and agency of each heroine in her acts and more generally in her life. The striking feature of the novels is that they narrate different stories of failure, variations of the urban individual's downfall and suffering, and more particularly the tragic conflicts of three women in Turkey associated with their particular modernity experiences. In this sense, they tell the three stories of the failed self-actualization and trouble the values and manners of the Turkish female identity and its modernness. Within the fragmentary narrative structure of each novel, the protagonist is situated in a recent crisis on its own terms that she realizes her failure and limit of her agency after a certain incident. The character's self-awareness leads to an existential and moral crisis that also contains a slightly intellectual concern about Turkish society. The crises of the heroines reflect their mixed feelings of angst, sorrow, anger, despair, disappointment, and suffering.

The major traits of these three characters resemble the conventional features of the *Bildungsroman* crystallized in the nineteenth century and evolved in the twentieth century.³⁰ However, these novels are not traditional *Bildung* narratives in European literatures that "the hero[ine]'s conflict with social authority (typically a real or symbolic father) ultimately leads to an affirmation of that authority in the social sphere and in the choice of vocation."³¹ On the contrary, these characters question their ways of being, their self-destructive integration into society, and their secular ethics, if considering the discourses and policies of Turkey's modernization. Moreover, the existential angst and self-questioning

30 Moretti, *The Ways of the World*, 5.

31 Gregory Castle, *Reading the Modernist Bildungsroman* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006), 8. In the twentieth century, European novelists like Joseph Conrad, Mann, Rilke, Kafka, and Joyce "set about writing stories of 'formation'—in which the *Bildung* does not occur: in which objective culture, congealed in conventions and institutions, no longer helps to construct individual subjects, but wounds and disintegrates them." See also Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic the World System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez* (London: Verso, 1996), 195. In the particular case of the modern Turkish novel, see also Gürle, "Wandering on the peripheries," 96-112, and "Hermits, Stoics, and Hysterics: Turkish Democracy and the Female Bildungsroman," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 90-107.

of each individual occur not in her early twenties at the threshold of maturity as in many conventional *Bildungsroman*, but in their mid-thirties or forties. This crucial difference indicates that the protagonists in these novels problematize their self-identity and moral values; they do not pursue reconciled harmony and social integrity. The inner conflict and self-confrontation of each heroine then form the tragic consciousness in the novels due to the irrevocability of what has happened or been lost in her life. This irrevocability implies the agency of the protagonists and the degree of their responsibility as well.

Several recurring themes and notions play a vital role in the plots, and each heroine questions both herself and certain values about the secular ethics at that time, touching upon significant subjects, particularly (in) fidelity, sexuality, chastity, virginity, the female body, and self-devotion to Turkey's nationalist modernization. The ways in which these themes are tackled in the novels convey an unnamed feminist discourse and an explicitly critical approach to the image of the singular modern Turkish woman and its masculinist construction while depicting the stories of these well-educated, middle-class, urban, Turkish women in fragmentary episodes. The plot construction of the novels, in this respect, lies in the narration of the self-confrontation or constant self-questioning that depicts the personal feelings, disappointments, dilemmas, confusion, and alienation of three women associated with the masculinist mindset in Turkey.

The idea of the tragic in the novels therefore arises from the ways of their uneven self-fulfillment due to the understanding of the "development of an individual toward a normative ideal,"³² in the setting of Turkey's modernization. Each character of the novel come to a point that their normative ideal is a failed one or a terrible fallacy; she wants to re-evaluate how and why she previously acted in certain cases. This re-evaluation shows the tension not only between the individual and the community but also between their agency, destiny, and the uncontrollable forces beyond them; their personal responsibility, coincidence, or contingency; their previous acts, present desires, and self-critical views.

32 Tobias Boes, *Formative Fictions, Cosmopolitanism, and the Bildungsroman* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 3.

The Tragic, Feminist, or Both?

The self-confrontation of each heroine constitutes the idea of tragic in each story, making these narratives modern tragedies of the individual who seeks self-realization and meaning concerning the modern condition in Turkey. Tragedy, here, refers to a particular condition in which a character in the novel deals with an existential or moral crisis at present, which puts her (or his in other novels) into a difficult situation and thus leads to mental, emotional, and even physical suffering. In this respect, tragedy semantically denotes the tragic condition in any kind of narrative, rather than a particular literary genre that is genealogically derived from the ancient Greek tragedies. The reason for the tragic conflicts of the Turkish femininities in the novels depends on the sharp contradiction between the features of the idealized Republican woman and the protagonists' desires or experiences in life.

All three heroines in the novels, indeed, serve as dedicated actors in Turkey's modernization with a Western-oriented lifestyle and a secular mindset. The narrative construction of these characters' inner conflicts, therefore, lies in the self-confrontation processes in which they question the socio-political meanings of (in)fideliy, sexuality, chastity, and the female body. That is to say, these characters emotionally suffer as they encounter the limited and masculinist definition of the idealized modern Turkish women —the imposed, limited, single female identity— and the social pressure of the environment. Socio-culturally and even historically, the modern Turkish femininities are therefore formed with the performed gender roles and acts that "compel the body to conform to a historical idea of 'woman', to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to a historically delimited possibility."³³ Judith Butler's argument is valid for the case of Turkey as well. Therefore, the imperativeness she underlines is where and why the tragic condition of the protagonists in the novels occurs as each character self-consciously disappointedly questions if and to what extent she wants to maintain the learned performative acts and daily manners in westernizing Turkey.

The protagonists of the three novels cannot fully experience their desires, sexualities, or simply their freedom as promised by the secular politics in Turkey. They struggle to constitute a female agency until the moment they begin to qu-

³³ Butler, "Performative Acts," 522.

estion themselves. The tragic in the novel then is a process of self-confrontation and emotional suffering that may lead to the self-awareness of the contradiction between the imposed female identity as a duty for the nation and the desires of the protagonists. The configuration of the tragic stories of these Turkish femininities moves beyond the conventional narrative features and representations of the idealized images of the nationalist women. For instance, most novels of Halide Edip Adıvar depict powerful but asexual and self-sacrificing women who prioritize national matters and the country over the self.³⁴

However, these three novels, which were published after a couple of decades of Edip's novels, narrate the emotional, mental, and intellectual sufferings of the "emancipated but unliberated"³⁵ protagonists that make the female body and sexuality the focal point of the authentic self and individuality. The tragic construction of each female character in the novels lies in her awakening or self-awareness as a process of an existential crisis while the protagonists self-consciously confront the values and practices of the Republican woman imaginary, sometimes semi-consciously and sometimes quite self-critically. These tragic constructions substantially depict the experiences of these heroines with the masculinist norms and sexist pressure of the social environment in the modes of self-confession, testimony, constructing self-identity, and autobiographical female experience.

In this respect, these novels convey very similar narrative features and patterns of what Rita Felski calls "feminist aesthetics." Felski broadly defines feminist aesthetics as "a necessary or privileged relationship between female gender and particular kind of literary structure, style, or form."³⁶ In her analysis

34 See Hülya Adak, "Otobiyografik Benliğin Çok-Karakterliliği: Halide Edip'in İlk Romanlarında Toplumsal Cinsiyet," in *Kadınlar Dile Düşünce*, ed. Sibel Irzık and Jale Parla (Istanbul: İletişim, 2004), 65. The fall of women is a common motif in Turkish novels of the late Ottoman era. For instance, Bihter as a heroine in *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Forbidden Love) and Ömer Behiç in *Kırık Hayatlar* (Broken Lives) become a subject of the tragic in the context of Ottoman-Turkish modernity process. See Zeynep Uysal, *Metruk Ev: Halit Ziya Romanında Modern Osmanlı Bireyi* (Istanbul: İletişim, 2014), 14-15.

35 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Emancipated but Unliberated? Reflections on the Turkish Case," *Feminist Studies* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 324.

36 Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 19.

of many novels written in English, including American literature, Felski uses some definitional terms that explain the common particularities of the novels, such as "the self-discovery narrative," "the feminist *Bildungsroman*," and "the novel of awakening" in her theoretical framework.³⁷ I do not mean to apply Felski's distinct categories to the three novels and Turkish literature in general because the Turkish novel consists of completely different narrative aspects and literary legacy evolved in another socio-cultural context. However, it is worth highlighting the similarities of women's writing that reveal the commonalities and differences of feminist poetics in other literatures.

Structurally, the self-confrontation of each character in the novels designates the plot construction, order of time, and spatial imagination. Their self-confrontations indicate different existential crises and their processes. Meli, Nermin, and Aysel, each of them deal with a conflictual paradox between their ways of being and their previously internalized values that made them modern urban Turkish women. The process of the tragic conflict, then, goes from the recognition of the fallacy regarding a way of being in the world—and in Turkey—to the heroine's newly changing approach to the imposed female identity as she has been struggling to maintain it in the same way. For instance, Meli in *Korsan Çıkmazı* is presented as a wounded, sorrowful, slightly angry, and fragile woman who experienced a scandalous incident that depends on the masculinist social pressure and the destructive gossip about that event. Apart from the tension between Meli's act and the suppressing moral value of the society, the condition of the tragic relies on the questions of why and to what extent a coincidence may demolish one's life due to the masculinist and sexist approach that disparages women's sexuality or sexual desire, even judging an individual with that aspect.

Meli's discourses and the narrative voice in the novel, indeed, criticize this approach within the novel, reflecting her hopeless and pessimistic view of her case in the 1960s: "Oh god, how to put up with it! How weak we are against the social environment. How come we can be such backward, such a bigot."³⁸ After the incident and its catastrophic consequences, Meli complains about the backwardness of the society, conveying a similar idealist vision and understanding

³⁷ See *Ibid.*, 83-150.

³⁸ Meriç, *Korsan Çıkmazı*, 143.

of Turkey's top-down modernization project to a great extent. This bitter event becomes the turning point for Meli's awakening and the reason for the tragic in her story that highlights the tension between an urban female protagonist and the masculinist moral values of the society in Turkey.

Another aspect of the tragic in the novel lies in Meli's certain act(s). Although her vision does not fit the masculinist values and ethics of the society, the way Meli deals with the social pressure, sexism, and the imposition of chastity as the function of this pressure on her life does not provide a radical solution and rebellious act. Throughout the act of reading, the readers may not expect a decisive and stubborn action from her, for instance, Antigone's brave attitude against the law and ethics of her society. Instead, Meli chooses to dedicate herself to expanding the idealism of being modern in her view through education; her task is to educate the new young generations as a non-religious and idealist teacher. In this respect, although Meli's resisting anger and anti-masculinist approach include a certain degree of feminist discourse in the novel, her emotional objection does not comprehend the structural reason(s) behind the masculinist structure of the idealized Turkish women imaginary.

Meli's characterization therefore involves a paradox, and the narrative discourse of the novel seems to oscillate between the re-constitution of the masculinist dimension of the image of the modern women and its implied critique. The novel, on the other hand, rarely touches upon any socio-economic matters and the ideological questioning of Turkey's modernization. In this respect, the tragedy of the urban individual as in Meli's story manifests the paradox of the dialectic between the individual and the social. The external narrator also underlines it with an open-ended question: "Is this story a story of what happened to Meli or that of the particular way the society perceives and thinks."³⁹

Contrary to Meli in *Korsan Çıkmaızı*, Nermin in *Tuhaf Bir Kadın* conveys a more aggressive feminist voice and a deeper contradiction between her abstract ideal regarding modern Turkish women and the socio-cultural realities of Turkey. Nermin's dilemma, however, lies in the tension between her elitist, intellectual attitude and her detachment from the people of Turkey in terms of social class and worldview despite her ideologically leftist rhetoric. She holds an accentuated leftist mindset but lacks action in the social world of the novel. Nermin's inner

39 Meriç, *Korsan Çıkmaızı*, 120.

conflict in the last chapter emerges as the process of recognizing to be mistaken and confronting her contradictions and flawed actions.

In this chapter, Nermin stays in a hotel after a certain kind of mental breakdown, which adds a dramatic layer to the plot. The whole chapter contains both her impressions and observations in the room and the flashbacks that sometimes ironically portray her as a leftist, intellectual woman in the previous years. The representation of two different temporalities about Nermin's acts and discourses in this chapter demonstrates her dilemma and oscillation in the narrative. Another contradiction about Nermin is the distance between her upper-middle-class and her left-wing populism. This distance reinforces the configuration of the tragic as it includes not only her existential and moral crisis but also her responsibility for this crisis beyond the socio-cultural and ideological factors. There is a certain fallacy in Nermin's acts that the narrative self-referentially depicts.

The matter of a tragic fallacy becomes more explicit in *Ölmeye Yatmak*. Aysel explains her vulnerable situation and sorrow while she is lying in the bed with a suicidal intention: "They do not understand the pain of being wrong. The pain of being mistaken at an unexpected moment. Unbearableness in this."⁴⁰ In a similar vein, the tragic condition of Aysel's story in the novel relies on the unresolved conflict between her idealized, patriotic, urban Turkish woman characteristic and her self-awareness of this limited female subjectivity. This crucial tension bears on Turkey's secular-national politics, but what configures the tragic in the novel includes three major aspects that designate the plot construction and narrative discourse. These are Aysel's implied intention of committing suicide, her moral concern about her sexual intimacy with her student Engin as the motive of her implied suicidal attempt, and her increasing self-awareness and liberation from any repressive role and responsibility due to the process of self-confrontation.

When Aysel locks herself in the room at the outset, there are explicit indications about her intention to commit suicide there. While she lies on the bed naked, she started to review her growth and her engagement with all the values and practices of the secular life in westernizing Turkey. The act of suicide and its playful hints thus constitute the narrative logic and the tragic in the novel. Aysel's intimacy, or her unfaithfulness from the perspective of her husband Ömer, conveys more than moral uneasiness in the plot because it primarily functions as a constructive act of her

40 Agaoglu, *Ölmeye Yatmak*, 363.

female identity imposed by Turkey's state feminism. Aysel is presented as an exemplary "daughter" of modern Turkey who becomes a patriotic, urban woman, particularly a successful professor thanks to the gender politics of Turkish modernization.

However, it is the same modernization project that limits her sexuality, personal desires, and even her agency as a woman that cannot go beyond the secular ethics and social responsibility of a good citizen in Turkey. The first layer of the tragic in the novel is Aysel's choice of following the secular way of being over the oppressive patriarchal traditional way of being imposed by her father. The second layer is that she has been trapped in another kind of masculinist mindset that regulates the features and definition of her womanhood for the sake of becoming modern, thereby restricting its definition. The third layer of the tragic refers to Aysel's moral concern about her sexual intercourse with Engin, which makes her feel shameful, guilty, and undignified. Throughout her self-confrontation, Aysel meditates on her past and all the ways she went through in her life until the present. The narrative mode seems to show that Aysel confronts her self-identity and adolescence shaped by the politics of Turkey's modernization that determines the degree of her modernness, her urban female identity, and her intellectual formation.

Çimen Günay-Erkol criticizes that Aysel's sexuality is instrumentalized in the novel as it "is not problematized in a historical frame."⁴¹ However, whether it is a literal or a symbolic act, the way Aysel feels that she needed intercourse with Engin to emancipate herself is also quite tragic because it shows her despair, confusion, and alienation. This condition as another fallacy indicates the fourth dimension of the tragic configuration in the novel as her recent flawed action. On the other hand, this configuration turns into not only Aysel's self-questioning about her identity and sexuality but also the critical inquiry into the socio-cultural, economic, and political aspects of Turkey's modernization in the novel. Therefore, the textual strategy of the novel primarily subverts the "discursive authority" of "the intellectual credibility, ideological validity, and aesthetic value"⁴² constituted by the nationalist understanding and its masculinist mindset.

41 Günay-Erkol, "Osmanlı-Türk Romanından," 170.

42 Lanser, *Fictions of Authority*, 6; 15. For a detailed analysis in this respect, Sibel Irzik, "Ölmeye Yatmak, Anlatı ve Otorite," in *Hayata Bakan Edebiyat Adalet Agoğlu'nun Yapıtlarına Elestirel Yaklaşımlar*, ed. Nüket Esen and Erol Koroğlu (Istanbul: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi, 2003), 46-56.

Put it differently, like the two other novels, *Ölmeye Yatmak* forms the nucleus of feminist writing in the Turkish novel and contributes to both the modernist novelistic poetics and feminist aesthetics in Turkish literature.⁴³

Conclusion

The inner conflicts of these three female characters in the novels indicate a shift from the idea of *Bildung* in the context of Turkey to a process of individual alienation that forces the characters to question their ways of being in the world and particularly in Turkey. The self-confrontation of each protagonist is related to the female self, national identity, sexuality, modernness, and women's body. The existential or moral crisis derived from this relationality becomes the main texture of the three novels. I do not propose that neither the feminist discourse necessarily is or can be always generated from within tragic thought nor every tragic configuration is supposed to be feminist. However, the existential and ethical crises narrated in these three novels lead to the emergence of an anti-patriarchal and anti-sexist discourse that constituted a kind of feminist writing and its poetics in the Turkish novel. The tragic, then, can include a strong feminist dimension in the Turkish novel, rather than only despair, sorrow, and lack of agency.

These three novels also undermine the masculinist construction of the ideal modern Turkish woman discourse with varying resisting voices, tones, and styles in the stories of the women associated with the modern condition in Turkey at that time. Moreover, the unnamed feminist critique provides a new mode of representation and narration that also problematizes the idea of the so-called female *Bildung* concerning the nationality, self-consciousness, and gender of modernity.⁴⁴ However, this article does not make any general claim

⁴³ There is an unexamined tendency to claim that the female writers were the leading figures of the modernist and experimental literary understanding in Turkish literature. Although the texts written by female authors were and still are innovative, it is too controversial to generalize without locating those literary works in the whole picture of the Turkish novel until the 1980s. For this claim, see Güneli Gün, "The Woman in the Darkroom: Contemporary Women Writers in Turkey," *World Literature Today*, 60, no. 2 (Spring, 1986): 275. The underrepresentation of female authors and their writing can be explicitly seen in the translations of Turkish literature, especially into English. See Arzu Akbatur, "Turkish Women Writers in English Translation," *MonTI 3* (2011): 174-175.

⁴⁴ Although Turkey has never been colonized in history, the Turkish novel involves some similarities with the postcolonial literature. For the key features of post-colonial literature in this

about the relationship between the idea of the tragic and the feminist poetics in the Turkish novel as the analyzed novels are limited. It is also significant to state that any kind of feminist reading should “avoid abstraction” and generalization, in terms of the interplay between narrative form and feminist discourse, without using a large corpus of literary texts.⁴⁵ The small-scale studies with closed reading should reconsider the relationship between gender and language and that between feminist writing and narrative form within a specific case, genre, or period along with many other aspects.

To conclude, although the gendered authorship is explicitly rejected as a distinctive category at the outset of the article, it would be useful and comparable for future studies to discuss other novels written by different authors who define themselves as male, female, or any other gender categories, focusing on social class, ethnic or cultural belonging, and ideological positioning. The relationship between the tragic and the notion of modernity requires more research and deeper analyses from the different perspectives because exploring this relationship can help us to understand the various dimensions of trauma, testimony, atonement, and collective memory employed in Turkish literature. This article, by recognizing its own limits and shortcomings, is a humble attempt to meditate on the tragic and its manifestations in this direction.

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respect, see Monica Fludernik, “Ideology, Dissidence, Subversion A Narratological Perspective,” in *Narratology and Ideology: Negotiating Context, Form, and Theory in Postcolonial Narratives*, ed. Divya Dwivedi, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Richard Walsh (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2018), 200-201.

⁴⁵ For further discussion, see Ruth E. Page “Feminist Narratology? Literary and Linguistic Perspectives on Gender and Narrativity,” *Language and Literature* 12, no. 1 (2003): 43-56.

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