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**1950s Generation
of the Turkish Short Story**

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1950s Generation of the Turkish Short Story

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Abstract

Turkish authors and poets in the 1950s confronted the literary tradition of the past. With the help and support of Western influences, young writers especially began to gather around some new literary journals in an attempt to renew the conception of literature. In these years, the number of short story writers dramatically increased, creating what many books about the history of Turkish literature called the “Golden Age of Short Story.” Works from this period are still mentioned and discussed today. Of course, the reasons behind the epithet “Golden Age” are not only quantitative but also qualitative. Modernist writers not only judged the writers of the antecedent generation and the works of socially realistic authors, but also began to discuss existentialism and surrealism, movements which had great impact on writers in the world and also in Turkey. Toward the end of the Fifties, the impact became clearly observable in the works of avant-garde writers. Starting from literary discussions in journals and proceeding to the basic themes and formal innovations in the short stories of 1950s, this article discusses the generation of 1950s short story as an “age of detachment from tradition.”

Keywords: Modernism, Generation of 1950s in Turkish short story, Existentialism, Surrealism

In the 1950s, significant political and social changes occurred in Turkey. The one-party system ([Republican People's Party](#)) came to an end in the election of 1950 and a multi-party period began. The Democratic Party (DP) won the election and the new government took steps that accelerated the process of integration with the capitalist system of the world, and especially with the U.S.A. On the other hand, the building of harbors, dams, bridges, and new city designs, including construction of highways through Marshall Aid, opened the way for immigration from villages to big cities. With migrants now in the citizen profile of the city, the view of the big city began to change. Its structuring process and its crowding gave inspiration to avant-garde artists.

In the Cold War that began between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R. after the Second World War, Turkey sided with the U.S.A. On the one hand, the Turkish government was trying to have good relations with the U.S.A., and a strong American wind began to blow in Turkey, promising to make Turkey into "little America." On the other hand, attacks on minorities, compulsions directed towards intellectuals, universities, and the press caused the relation between the state and intellectuals to get worse. Most of the literary journals adopted a stance against the DP. Because of the anti-imperialist nature of intellectuals and writers, a significant resistance to the DP and its politics emerged.

In the literary world, authors and poets were confronting traditions of the past. With the help and support of Western influences, young writers especially began to gather around some new literary journals in an attempt to renew the conception of literature.

At the beginning of 1950s, Sait Faik, Orhan Kemal and Sabahattin Ali's writing styles were dominant. And at the same time, "village literature" was improving strongly and rapidly. In these years, the number of short story writers increased dramatically, creating what many books about the history of Turkish literature called the "Golden Age of Short Story." Works of this era are still mentioned and discussed today. Of course the reasons behind the epithet "Golden Age" are not only quantitative but also qualitative.

Modernist writers, while judging the writers of the antecedent generation and the works of socially realistic authors, also began to discuss existentialism and surrealism, movements that had great impact on writers around the world and also in Turkey. Toward the end of 1950s, these influences become clearly observable in the works of avant-garde writers.

Following the [Second World War](#), Existentialism became a well-known and significant philosophical and cultural movement, mainly through the public prominence of two French writers, [Jean-Paul Sartre](#) and [Albert Camus](#). A central proposition of Existentialism is that existence precedes [essence](#), which means that the actual life of the individual is what constitutes his "essence" in the absence of a predetermined essence that defines what it is to be a human. The individual is (1) defined only insofar as he acts and (2) is responsible for his actions. As Sartre puts it in his essay "[Existentialism is a Humanism](#)," "Man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards" (*Varoluşçuluk [Existentialism]*, 22).

Selahattin Hilav, an important writer and philosopher, emphasizes the importance of extensive interest in Existentialism in Turkey with these words: “First of all, Turkish artists came to the same level with the esthetic and intellectual creations of the West [...] Thus, the same influence helped to move the formal and rigid language from its place and provide the basis for lingual freedom and expanding vocabulary” (“Zihin Kuşları Üzerine...” [On The Birds of Mind], 11-12).

Influenced by these movements, Turkish writers’ changed their views about realism. They started to exhibit the inner world of the individual in depth. They actively used images, metaphors, different modes of time and space abstractions in order to produce the flexibility in the language that is essential for and well matched with profundity.

The texts of the modernist short story writers were criticized for being “obscure” and “dark.” Some critics insisted that it was hard to understand anything from certain texts (Şafgil, “Sanatta Yerlilik” [Locality in Art]). It was perhaps the first time that people talked about the meaning of “obscurity” and “clarity” in literature and whether clarity was always a feature of good literature (Öz, “Halka Yönelmek” [Head Towards the Public]). On the other hand, realism in literature became a significant discussion topic, and many authors began to contemplate the qualifications of realist literature. Thereby, the modernist writers of 1950s took courageous steps toward a detachment from literary traditions (Duru, “Gerçeklik Üzerine” [On Realism]; Özlü, “Toplumcu-Gerçekçi Yazar” [Socialist Realist Writer]).

The generation of writers of the 1950s, which Leylâ Erbil called the “age of detachment from tradition” (“Soruşturma Yanıtları” [Replies in an Interview]) accelerated the modernization of not only the short story but also the novel and contributed immensely to today’s literary richness.

Main Discussions in the Literary Journals

Thematic and formal change in the presentation of reality gave rise to discussions that questioned the limits of such binary oppositions as obscurity-clarity, individualism-socialism, and nationality-internationality. The “Blue Movement,” which took its name from the journal *Blue*, paid special attention to social realism. For the writers who generated this movement, narratives that rested on modernist techniques such as “stream of consciousness” and “inner speeches” or “surrealist elements” could be more realistic as long as they represented the versatility of reality and served a specific essence. They asked whether it was enough to stress social problems like inequalities in the society, problems that villagers and workers have to cope with in Turkey. Was it enough to create superficial shallow types that represent a villager or a worker? For the social realists of the Blue Movement, it would be more significant to create a human being, a profound, deep character. But some other critics thought that this kind of literature leaned on “individualism,” and therefore was an expression of avoidance of social realities (Çiyiltepe, “Korkak Yazar

Bireycidir” [Coward Writer is an Individualist]; Fethi Naci, “Çıkmazdaki Edebiyat” [Literature in Predicament]). These writers who dispraised modernist texts as being “obscure” and “dark” also criticized modernist authors for being imitators who slid into Western literary trends. Thus the existentialist concerns of young writers also met with the same accusations. At the end of 1950s, this connection reached a high point, and almost every journal carried a critical essay or a discussion concerning “angst” or “despair.” “Despair,” which is one of the key concepts of Existentialism, had become a notion upon which most of the writers commented arbitrarily. Some socialist writers who had strong social reflexes suggested that young avant-garde writers “did not have a right” to be in despair at that time. It was not the time of being in despair or being pessimistic; it was the time of being united and active, a time to lead the society “by means of” literature. The discussion of literature as an instrument or target was always on the agenda beginning from “Servet-i Fünun” (Period of innovation in literature in years between 1896-1901) until the 1980s.

Ferit Edgü, one of the popular writers of this generation, captured this conflict in his essay “The Power of Despair”: “Look carefully at the novels and short stories that are discussed today. Eventually all of them are attempts to explain the society from only one aspect. Well, but what about the human being as such?”. He said that they certainly wanted freedom, peace, and an independent society. But they felt obliged to look at the individual from another aspect, that of trying to comprehend the human being above all, of dealing with his conflicts and desires without feeling responsible for “giving society a social message” (71).

As Zeynep Direk states in her article “Existentialism in Turkey,” the process of the emergence of “thinking agent” in Turkish literature proceeds in parallel with the writers’ deep interest in Existentialism. In those days, Existentialism was understood in terms of individualism and pessimism, so what was being discussed was its popular image, not the philosophy itself. As a result, in the 1950s, with the rise of Existentialism and the modernist techniques used to capture and present the individual in depth, modernist texts other than Western examples have emerged. Techniques such as stream of consciousness, inner speeches, and inner monologues arose at the beginning of the century with such writers as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Marcel Proust; but in Turkish literature these techniques were used actively by the avant-garde generation of 1950s.

Basic Themes of the Short Stories

Meaninglessness, Nothingness and Boredom

In the texts of modernist writers, thoughts of “meaningless,” “nothingness,” and, in connection with these, feelings of “confinement” can often be observed. Boredom, a condition usually caused by monotony, is a feature of many of the characters.

In the texts of Yusuf Atılgan, we find characters who are anxious in any circumstance, who feel confined and, therefore, cannot attribute meaning to life. These characters are not exclusively male. Sometimes a young girl in a village, or even a hen that is curious about the world outside the coop, can look for meaning. Being confined and incapable of moving seems almost the destiny of Atılgan's characters.

Another important short story writer, Vüs'at O. Bener, in several stories tells of a man who is a stranger in a small town. This man has a complicated inner world and is well educated compared to the local burghers. With the boredom caused by his strangeness, he tries to waste time with the people around him. In the story "Dost" [Friend], the stranger in town shows this attitude when he is drinking and chatting with his friend, the butcher Ali: "Damn it! Is this life? Now, am I enjoying drinking with this man? Only boredom... I wish I was at home. Books... God damn books! What did they teach me? Could they take away the despair inside of me?" (11).

Other important writer of the generation, Feyyaz Kayacan, who published his first book, *Şişedeki Adam* [Man in the Bottle] in 1956, objectified the thought of nothingness in the short story "Hiçoğlunun Serüvenleri" [Adventures of Nothingman]. This text contains various surrealist features. The character who realizes that he/she is walking (in the air) 5-6 centimeters above the ground thinks that he has to look at everybody from above because he is nameless and begs for a name from the people around him.

This sort of discomfort can be observed in almost all the avant-garde short stories. They continually must handle the absurdity of life, the feeling of confinement caused by the impositions of traditions and social life. And some of the writers emphasize the despair totally based on existentialist causes instead of external issues.

Desperate Characters on the Streets of the City

The basic expression of boredom and depression has characters wandering the streets without purpose. This type is a "loiterer," one who wastes time without a job or a specific purpose. The loiterer in Turkish literature was formed by the effect of Sait Faik's tales. But in this era, the loiterer has changed a little and has turned to a more depressed and pessimistic person, consistent with the popular image of Existentialism. The migration from villages to big cities that began in the 1950s changed the composition of the city, and this "uncivilized" crowd depresses the wandering man. For example, in one of the short stories of Orhan Duru, one of the most significant writers of 50s, the main character thinks, "I am wandering with hands in my pockets. Distressed. I walk upwards. I can feel that terrible crowd—or let's say disgusting if you like—from everywhere" ("Bat" [Sink], 25).

These wandering characters usually find themselves in unpleasant situations. Some fight with people in crowded buses, streets, and offices; some are beaten; some decide to steal something from a shop and some commit suicide in the street. One of the characters of Ferit Edgü compares the houses of the city to a spider web. He cannot comprehend people rushing around.

Thinking that they stink, he wants to destroy the tattered houses: “Must be destroyed. Then the wrecks should be cleaned up. Here, little cottages, single houses should be built. Then? Then they must be destroyed again” (“Bozgun” [Defeat], 12).

The crowd in the streets and the illuminated windows of shops are alienating issues for the characters. The big city that was changing during this period causes the short story characters to try to give meaning to the changes. While “the man wandering without a purpose” expresses the will of the writer to find an original experience to tell, the city that is described both as depressing and full of surprises is really an appropriate background for the bored man.

Concrete Expressions of Disquiet

The concretion of existentialist or social disquiet in images that express anxiety is one of the important themes chosen by these writers. In the 1950s the books of Kafka had just been translated, and his impact on Turkish avant-garde writers can be seen clearly through the nightmarish ambiance and allegoric manner of narration.

For example, insects and rats that appear and suddenly attack houses seem to be the symbolic expression of angst. In the narratives of Orhan Duru, Ferit Edgü, Leylâ Erbil, and Demir Özlü, this kind of concretion can frequently be observed. In Orhan Duru’s short story “Karabasan” [Nightmare], a man sees an insect in the sink. Then the insects proliferate. We can see the same nightmarish situation in “Küçük Sinekler” [Little Flies]. This time, flies attack the house and take away all the main character’s peace of mind. In Ferit Edgü’s stories, angst is concreted in the rats in the house, or in a wound that suddenly appears on the body, or in unidentified sounds that are heard continually in the house. The man plagued by rats thinks: “This world is hell... In the outside, others. In your room, only in your room... Even in your room to which you run away from others and hide, in your messy but lovely room... Rats... Here under the guise of something else... Isn’t there a place...?” (“Odada” [In the room], 18). Another concretion of existentialist angst is in characters that always feel sick and disgusted not only with themselves but also with the external world. In almost all the narratives of Yusuf Atılgan, the filthiness and awful smells are remarkable. We can think of these also as signs of anxiety.

Aggression and Desire to Kill

One of the common points of the avant-garde writers is that they have created aggressive and offensive characters that get angry excessively or without cause. Some of these characters have a desire to kill based on personal and social unhappiness or derived only from their need to believe that they exist. Demir Özlü is an important short story writer of the 50s and he has followed Sartre’s Existentialism very closely. The main character of Özlü’s story “Bağısız” [Unbound], asks a married woman with whom he sleeps if she loves her husband. As she smiles apathetically and indifferently, the man suddenly gets angry and kills her. Although we have enough evidence for the

neurotic character of the man throughout the story, in the rest of it, the arbitrariness and absurdity of murder is emphasized.

In the stories by Yusuf Atılgan, “Yaşanmaz” [Unlivable], the main character’s rage, mainly toward himself, causes him to kill somebody else. In another story, a different aggressive manner can be observed. Here the character harms neither himself nor another person. The only thing he does is to let other people harm him, so he can hate them and by doing so can keep his determination to kill himself.

Leylâ Erbil expresses her rage and revolt against social pressures, prejudices, and female-male relations with more tough words than other woman writers. In her narratives we can observe sadomasochist tendencies, aggressive attitudes derived from others’ intolerance and insensitivity (usually men’s), and the will to kill.

Crime and the Meaning Attributed to Crime

As a result of aggression and excessive anger, some of the characters in these stories kill or attack others, and some resort to stealing as a means of feeling their existence, a kind of personal revolt..

In “Atılmış” [Thrown] by Yusuf Atılgan, the main character who thinks that nobody recognizes him, asks about the price of apples and no one answers. Then he steals one of the apples. But the stolen apple does not give any him satisfaction, so he throws it on the grass. Afterwards he starts to think that others recognize him. Thanks to theft, this loiterer can feel his existence among others. The same theme is also handled in “Çıkılmayan” [Unleavable]. This time the character steals some money in order to reach a free life, a life without obligations: “This money is comforting and relaxing. It will save him from his job that he never likes or get used to. He thinks this money is the only instrument that frees the man in this society” (65). But the stolen money causes the anxiety to deepen and convinces him that salvation is not possible.

“Bir Daha Yapmam” [I Won’t Do That Again] by Feyyaz Kayacan, a writer living in London in the 1950s, begins with a confession of theft: “I’m bored badly. I was captured yesterday when I was stealing a book. If only it would be quite all right at least” (149). He keeps on being impassive and indifferent during his dialogue with the police officer. He tells the officer that he has stolen the book because of boredom, just for doing something. He feels a huge emptiness inside and tries to fill it with little excitements. But stealing a book does not change anything. It is not exciting enough.

In most of these texts, which are influenced by the narratives of Existentialist writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, we can observe characters, who are distressed by social values and obligations, who commit crimes due to boredom or the desire to feel their existence. An interrogation process (cross examination) reveals the loneliness of characters who cannot or do not even attempt to talk about their troubles, feeling that no one would understand anyway.

Characters that Can and Cannot Commit Suicide

These characters feel themselves disconnected from society, and this alienation pushes them to aggressive behaviors or to commit crimes. But sometimes this disconnection causes them to commit suicide or to live constantly with suicidal plans. In several stories of Yusuf Atılgan, the main characters search for various methods but don't actually commit suicide: "Best is to get poisoned but for poison I have to get out again among others. [...] I would have cut my wrist. What would others do when they broke the door? First I would have written on the wall a big UNLIVABLE with black paint" ("Yaşanmaz" [Unlivable], 59). Another character of Atılgan plans to commit suicide at the sea: "It would have happened at the sea. At the deep blue sea..." ("Bodur Minareden Öte" [Beyond the Scrubby Minaret], 75). But as I say, these characters do not follow through on their plans.

In the short stories of Ferit Edgü and Demir Özlü, characters usually do what they think. They kill themselves with pills or they jump into the canal. Demir Özlü thinks that suicide, which is a common theme among the short story writers of 1950s, does not express a defeat but maybe an urge to pass over to another process. Indeed, it can be said that these writers who try to construct the "new" in almost all fields of life use the theme of suicide for the purpose of manifesting a social reaction or rage, not as an expression of defeat.

Sexuality

Short story writers of this period tend towards issues that are essential for the psychological mood of the individual, and they prefer issues that have been handled superficially till then. Sexuality is one of those issues. Taboo subjects such as sexual incompatibility in marriage and sexual perversion became central to short stories and novels. The writers examine the effects of sexuality on human beings and reveal the various perceptions of sexuality. They ascribe various meanings to it in their specific fictive worlds.

The approaches of the characters to sexuality could be called "unhealthy." Ferit Edgü and Demir Özlü's literary conceptions of sexuality are similar. For both, sexuality is the result of boredom and disquiet and is sometimes disgusting. Yusuf Atılgan also conceives of sex as something disgusting and filthy.

In some texts "sexual hunger" is an important matter. Some writers give special importance to the sexual problems of puberty. Erdal Öz and Özcan Ergüder carefully analyze the psychological situation of their young narrators. These characters, usually acting according to their sexual drives, have or imagine having sex with women older than themselves. But these relationships are not based on love or intimacy.

The women of Leylâ Erbil react to these oversexed men. Her narrators are reactive to the patriarchal conservative system and its unfairness. She tries to show the conflicts and artificialities in human relations (mainly male and female relations) by focusing on characters' streams of consciousness. In Erbil's narratives, sexuality is a crucial factor that reproduces the artificiality in the characters' lives. Men are acting simply to have sex with women. They

pretend to love and care them. Or they pretend to be close friends, but eventually they demand sex. The women in these stories are also sometimes disgusted by sexuality, but not because of the impression of existentialist themes; rather, they are disgusted by the hypocritical behaviors of men.

Surreal and Absurd

Avant-gardes of this period also used surrealist techniques and created extraordinary and surreal occasions in order to make their points more striking. The most interesting book of Sait Faik, titled *There is a Snake in Alemdağ* (1953), had a great influence on modernist short story writers and contributed a great deal to these innovative attempts. Feyyaz Kayacan, who had strong relations with English surrealists during the years 1954-1956, also had a profound impact. In most of the short stories in his first book, *Şişedeki Adam* [Man in the Bottle], he generally makes his point by means of surreal events. In the short story “Hiçoğlunun Serüvenleri” [Adventures of Nothingman], the main character is walking 5-6 centimeters above the ground and as he doesn't have a name, he begs others for a name. Throughout the story, distance from the ground rises steadily.

Onat Kutlar, another important writer, was able to create extraordinary ambiances by the use of poetic similes that follow a direction from abstract to concrete. Although he does not always create completely surreal situations, the original similes in his descriptions bring the “surreal” tendency to the foreground. For example, the following expressions are like verses of İkinci Yeni [Second New] poems (that is a poetry movement which generally leans on associations, images, obscure meanings): “My uncle was intensifying and enhancing a deathlike void around himself.” (“Yunus” 28). “Child leans on to a cool summer night such as he leans on to a huge pillow.” (“Horozlar” [Roosters], 14). “The window slowly passes through a cloud.” “Forest came and filled the room all of a sudden.” (“Hadi” [Come On], 17-18).

Formal Innovations that Reinforce Content

The 1950s generation of the Turkish short story is an expression of change not only in content but also in form. Short story writers made striking innovations in the sentence, punctuation, editing, and position of the narrator as well as changing the way in which the inner worlds of characters were presented.

Changing of the Sentence

Most of the writers of this period thought deeply about the structure of the sentence and each of them reconsidered it in the context of its formal contribution to the content. For example, Ferit Edgü occasionally employs broken and incomplete sentences, and by employing that kind of sentence he can attain an expression that accords with the characters' emotional and psychological states, e.g., their inability to think reasonably, their confusion, or

their neurotic condition. He is also able to include his readers in the creative process via their need to complete some of his sentences.

Leylâ Erbil resists traditional beliefs, customs, and social compulsions. She exhibits this resistance by means of abolishing or destroying spelling rules and creating unique applications. Her sentences are often incomplete, interrupted, or completed after deviating from their original direction. By turning the accustomed sentence structure and syntax upside down, she is able to express the irregularity in the stream of consciousness effectively.

Modernist short story writers give special importance to the focus on human consciousness. Complex and long sentences, sometimes without punctuation marks, are well matched with the complexity an individual's thoughts. On the other hand, some authors use short and intermittent sentences that go well with their paralyzed, timid, and hesitant narrators. Long or short, but usually irregular, these sentences reveal the depressed, neurotic characters' states of mind. Characters that are bored with the old and worn system of not only life but also language try to construct a new one; but this is depressing in its own right.

Linguistic Deformations and Tendency towards Poetization

Deformations, disorder, violation of clichés and idioms are all effective linguistic innovations. Writers use deformations as a consequence of being bored with the accustomed forms. They see traditional forms as clichés and think of the role of such forms in literature as passé. As one of the important Turkish critics, Hüseyin Cöntürk, claims, "One reason for what we call depression is that forms in hand depressed us like a dead pattern" ("Dilde Deformasyon Gerekliği" 145). The accustomed form of writing may be simply described: to start a story, go on chronologically, generally to create types not deep characters, to proceed to a striking or surprising event, to tell the story with third person narration, not to be psychologically sensitive, etc... It seems that while modernist writers were interested in depressed individuals in content, they were also trying to overcome depression in form. The indicators of this endeavor are in the deformation of the language and the playing with conventional expressions.

Through deformations, poetization comes naturally. In this period, prose could not have remained simply prose. In these years, the "Second New" movement and a new understanding in poetry was being discussed. The Second New poets and avant-garde short story writers were in a close relationship. They were all "crazy" innovators who tried to displace all conventions relating to prose and poetry. Prose could be poetic and poetry can be prosaic. The main impetus behind that thought was the urge to create a personal writing style. And this urge pioneered the transformations and innovations that would come next.

Modernist writers of this period stood against traditions not only in daily life but also in their literary sense. They tended to destroy all kinds of patterns that could restrict their freedom. Georg Simmel's thought concerning modernist art movements is also valid for Turkish artistic transformations: "In

the most general cultural context, all of this movement means the denial of classicism as the absolute ideal of humankind and evolution. Because in classicism form is dominant” (75). We should understand “form” as “tradition” or “settled principle.” The short story writers of 1950s generation protested traditional narrative styles in order to describe the individual with all of his/her authenticity and vividness. Hence they initiated a rooted change not only in the genre of short story but also generally in the conception of literature.

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