

# Creating Turks in Fiction and Ethnography

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When my first ethnography, *Money Makes us Relatives*, was published in 1994 (White 2004 [1994]), it was quite well received by Turkish scholars, but one critique of my study of Turkish culture stood out. There is no such thing as a “Turk”, some critics wrote. That sounded strange to me, since Turks use that concept all the time. In fact, what is Turkish and what is not, who is a Turk and who is not – these are ever-present topics in Turkey for scholars as well as the public. Since that first book, I’ve thought long and hard about what the critics meant and what I can do about representing Turkishness in my work – that is, after all, what anthropologists do. Through our ethnographic writing we “create” for our audience a performance of what it means to be Turkish. We do this in all earnestness, trying to understand a society and culture from within and describing it not on our terms, but on their terms.

The field of anthropology has long held self-critical discussions about the wisdom and feasibility of such a project.<sup>1</sup> After all, we are never able to leave behind all of our own cultural expectations and biases. We try to be aware of such biases and to set them aside, but surely they continue to creep in, even in the kinds of questions we set out to answer. Our notion of Turkishness seems forever tainted by our expectations as Americans or Germans or Europeans.

And there is a second layer of expectation – that of the reader. Creation is a multi-sited project. As an example, in my first book I wrote about the lives of women and their families in Istanbul squatter areas. I was trying to explain how a system of subcontracting worked that in the new economy of the 1980s had created a kind of factory without walls. Thousands of poor women were put to work in their homes knitting for export. The work was organized and distributed by other families in the neighbourhood. Most of the profit, however, went to middle-class contractors from outside the neighbourhood. I discovered that there was a cultural basis for the women agreeing to work for very little pay – it was necessary for them to maintain the fiction that they weren’t really “working” in order to maintain their position in the family and community as “good women” whose primary occupation was taking care of home, husband and children. Instead of raging at the injustice of it, which I did in private, in my writing I tried to understand this situation from the women’s point of view. Keeping to the fiction that they were doing this work because they were industrious and out of neighbourli-

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<sup>1</sup> The first shot across the bow was *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus (1986). This was followed by an entire industry of anthropological soul-searching.

ness rather than for pay gave the women a certain advantage that more money for their labour would not have given them. That is, they were reinforcing their positions in the family and community. In those days of high inflation and an unstable economy, that gave them a lot more long-term security than a few extra liras would have.

Coming back to the issue of representation, in the resulting ethnographic book I tried to draw from this research a set of principles that, it seemed to me, governed the lives of women in such neighbourhoods and that explained how daily life and economic exchanges are suffused with cultural expectations of indebtedness, mutual assistance and reciprocity. It seemed to me that these principles in many ways governed what was appropriate and inappropriate labour and profit and what was required of men and women and of family members, and what was expected of neighbours. In fact, it seemed to me that these principles were present throughout Turkish society. To make that point, I included some examples in the book from middle-class families. I never ventured to say that reciprocity and the exchange of indebtedness was a hallmark of what it meant to be Turkish, but I admit to thinking it. I believed that anyone who had lived in Turkey would recognize the pressure to give freely and often of one's time and resources and connections, to continually open relations in which one person is indebted to another, and the reluctance ever to pay up because that would end the relationship and cut off the benefits of patronage and *torpil* (good relations). To me, that was Turkish. But to some of the Turkish critics, I was objectifying Turkish culture. It took me a while to figure out that the issue was as much a matter of the audience as the writer.

The novelist Elif Şafak once told me that a writer in Turkey is always a public intellectual, whether she wants to be or not. Şafak has been widely criticized in Turkey, among other things, for writing in English and for setting her characters outside of Turkey (vgl. Şafak 2007; Şafak 2004). What kind of a Turkish writer does THAT? people ask. The Nobel Laureate Orhan Pamuk has been criticized in Turkey for setting his novels too much inside himself, focusing on his individual, idiosyncratic experience (Pamuk 2004; Pamuk 2005). These are all common literary tropes outside of Turkey, but in Turkey the writer has long been a part of the Kemalist nation-building program. Writers positioned themselves or were positioned by the reader vis-à-vis an idealized narrative of progress, modernization, and secular civilization that was opposed to an equally simplistic narrative of oppression by Islam, patriarchy, and rural ignorance. This automatic positioning has been as true of sociological and anthropological writing on Turkey as of fiction and has only recently begun to change. In my ethnography, I had committed the sin of generalizing from conservative working class families to secular middle class families, mixing narratives, so to speak.

In my second ethnography about the rise of the Islamist movement in the 1990s (White 2002), I kept the critics in mind and tried very hard NOT to speak

about Turks in any general way, although some of the same cultural characteristics – reciprocity, neighbourliness, patronage – turned out to play as important a role in political organizing as they had in the economy of the 1980s. My example was the Istanbul neighbourhood of Ümraniye whose residents had elected an Islamist mayor and kicked out their left-of-centre mayor from the Republican People’s Party (known by its Turkish acronym CHP). In its simplest form, my argument was that they didn’t vote for the Islamists because they became more religious overnight. They supported the Islamist parties because these parties acted like good neighbours and developed relationships among people who really were neighbours, rather than coming in from the outside – and in that way mobilized millions of people, one by one. There were other contextual historical reasons, of course, but I won’t get into them here. My point is that it still seemed to me that it was worth talking about something Turkish here, but I didn’t go beyond the specific example of Ümraniye. The critics liked the book, although one young female Turkish journalist in a t-shirt and jeans asked me, “But don’t you think they’re WRONG to be like that? Shouldn’t they be more like us?”

Finally, I found a way to deal with this dilemma of presenting Turkishness without objectifying it, at least on my part. I couldn’t be held responsible for the reader. I created my own Turk. I wrote a novel set in 1886 Istanbul called *The Sultan’s Seal* (White 2006), and I created a fictional Turk, Kamil Pasha. I could make him anything I wanted to. Finally I could toy with these oppositions that people take so seriously. This is possible in part because in 1886 Kamil Pasha is outside the Republican narrative. He is a magistrate in the new civilian Nizamiye courts. He spent a year at Cambridge University in England. He’s a pasha, son of a former governor of Istanbul, but he believes that a man’s success should result from his own talents and efforts. In other words, I made him BOTH an urban, civilized Turk, a pre-Kemalist, so to speak, who believes in progress and the benefits of the west. I also made him suspicious of these things and worried about what his society and culture might lose as a result of such progress. He thinks religion is nothing more than superstition, but he struggles with the moral and emotional gap that this leaves in society and inside himself. He is urban, individual, and critical. His orientation is global: London, Boston, Paris. He experiments with lifestyle. But in his relationships, his expectations of other people, his job, his gestures, his eating and drinking habits, he is recognizably Turkish. In fact, in the second book in the series, *The Abyssinian Proof* (White 2008) Kamil – like today’s postmodernists – is pulled away from his cherished belief in progress. He loses his ability to believe that there’s a right way to do everything. Instead, he becomes more adept at negotiating relationships that are immensely satisfying to a man who has always been short of friends. But his new friendship leads him to question his assumption that he knows right from wrong. He learns that what is moral is not always rational and what is rational is not always moral.

Kamil Pasha is, in short, a unique character. To me, he encapsulates the essence of being Turkish. But he does NOT embody the narrative of progress in which he himself so fervently believes. Rather, he struggles with confusion, bewilderment, his sometimes contradictory feelings and inclinations. He has to balance his responsibility and duty toward his friends and family with his duty as a magistrate and a man of honor and rationality.

The reader has to work to disentangle the layers of meaning, just as the anthropologist tries to untangle layers of meaning in the lives she witnesses around her. My mistake had been to look for neat resolutions in the belief that this is what an ethnography and a reader needed to hear. There IS such a thing as a Turk, but neither the ethnographers nor the critics have been able to describe him. Perhaps such complex reality can only exist in fiction. The Turkish critics, by the way, loved the novel. One wrote that “it was like looking in a mirror” (Congar 2006). I rest my case.

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