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## **Merging the Political into the Personal:**

### **Identity Formation Narratives in *Anayurt Otel* (The Motherland Hotel)**

Yusuf Atılgan's novel *Anayurt Otel* was published in 1973 and it narrates personal experiences of Zebercet, a middle-aged lonely man, who lives in an anonymous small town in the hinterland of Aegean coast. He spends his entire life in the hotel where he was born. He tries to combat his suffocating daily routine through fantasies and delirious actions. It depicts, therefore, a highly personal story of an "outsider", who was belittled by modern meta-narratives which were effectively utilized in the transformation of Anatolian society into a modern nation. Zebercet's story of becoming a mad man is surrounded by the political symbols which undercover the uncanny aspects of becoming a nation-state. Although *Anayurt Otel* is an example of the "Third World literature", it is not a "national allegory" (Jameson, 1986) since its protagonist is not identified with the nation but the political process of constructing the Turkish national identity is depicted as an overarching spectrum to make sense out of the personal experience. The metaphorical narrative structure, therefore, establishes two separate layers of meaning and simultaneously questions the separation between the personal and the political, a significant sign of the so-called "modern" literature.

This presentation focuses on analyzing the multi-layered narrative structure of the novel in order to discuss how Zebercet's personal story is transformed into the realm of discussing how political symbols of social transformation demarcate personal identities and how the personal becomes a metaphor to understand the formation of political collective identities. It is also possible to question the clear cut separations between politics and aesthetics, individual and society in addition to the alternative uses of literature in the construction of both collective and personal identities by analyzing the novel's different layers of meaning. It would be coherent, therefore, first to benefit from

corresponding methods in the analysis of each semantic layer, and then to try to establish the relationship between the two layers.

The literal layer of meaning reflects the construction of self and personal identity by an isolated, lonely man who has many communication problems, as Berna Moran brilliantly points at (Moran 2002: 291-324). The *Anayurt Oteli*, in fact, has long been considered to be the modernist narrative of the inner crisis of the “self” which stems from the cultural and political crisis of social transformation. The novel consists of, therefore, Zebercet’s story of not able to become a modern individual, and narrates how his inability to play with the continuous and hasty transformation of social and cultural codes in the process of national modernization paves the way for a calamitous existential crisis. His basic coping mechanism in such an antagonistic social, cultural and political environment is to speak deliriously or to try to create an artificial daily routine in the restricted environment of the hotel. Neither his inner monologue nor his fragile daily routine, on the other hand, provide the necessary psychological maturity to be able to construct a coherent personal identity and mental ability to establish meaningful relationships with the “other”s. Other characters of the novel like Zebercet’s mother, his father, the cleaning woman, the woman coming with the late Ankara train, the retired military officer, various clients of the hotel and certain members of his imaginary old and wide family act like metaphors showing the pain, the dilemma and the oddness of such incapability.

The novel can also be read as an analogy for the historical process of Turkish modernization since the use of certain historical 'significant' dates (some of them are given as exact date, the month, the day and the year) are synonyms for the historical narrative of the establishment of the Turkish Republic. The dates in the novel are used to define the date of a certain event that takes place in the novel or they are used to determine a past event or a point significant in the life or in the past of Zebercet or some other characters. Besides, there are certain references to 'significant' persons or events that took place in the actual history of Turkish modernization process, and they also signifies an event in the novel. It can be said that, the events, the characters, the symbols (such as the hotel, the late Ankara train, the cat etc.) functions as referents of certain significant issues in Turkish modernization process.

It would be convenient to try to “decipher the unknown codes of a latent message” to be able to understand how Zebercet, the protagonist of a modernist/realist novel could be transformed into a metaphor. That kind of transformation is rare as well as resembles a literary border of the genre as it signifies its limits from the point of modern literary techniques. The use of certain dates and symbols,

such as the mustache, the late Ankara train, the hotel, the cat are among such ciphers that need to be decoded. Through the analysis of psychoanalytical images and symbols, the construction of certain oppositions in the novel such as me/other, the inside/ the outside, the power/ the resistance, it would be possible to answer why Yusuf Atılgan preferred to establish such a metaphoric narrative structure. By doing so, both the construction of Zebercet's consciousness and the remarks providing the parallel flow of the two different layers of narration would be revealed.

Zebercet is the manager (*katib*) of the hotel; he is a middle-aged and an average-sized man who spends his entire life in a small town hotel in the hinterland of Aegean coast. He is portrayed as an isolated man<sup>1</sup> who cannot communicate with others although he constantly dreams about gaining a woman's sincere love and acceptance both emotionally and sexually. (Moran, 2002). The military service is the only period when he left his small town. He assisted his father when he was a little boy and became the manager after his father's death. This situation results in a machine-like daily routine full of mundane works of the hotel, and ultimately creates a deep, oppressive inner voice which whispers Zebercet's ear that he lived out his entire life in vain. After his father's death, Zebercet hires a cleaning woman to look after the hotel, they begin living together and it becomes a part of his weekly routine to rape her in her sleep; as mundane as other daily dry works. It is rather bizarre that she never wakes up, resists or reacts against such an act of sexual violence. She preserves her inanimate existence until when Zebercet really kills her after another session of sexual violence. The title of "ortalıkçı kadın", which corresponds to "cleaning woman" in the novel, has closely associated with "orta malı", a term to describe prostitutes in vulgar language. It also socially refers to someone who does all the dirty and unwanted jobs coming from the lowest social strata. "Ortalıkçı kadın", therefore, was chosen purposefully to underline that the woman who works in the hotel was disdained both socially and sexually. This creates a sharp contrast between her and the lady coming with the late Ankara hotel, and makes it easier to identify their social and political positions and external referents with respect to modernization process.

In the opening pages, Atılgan describes Zebercet and his birth as "Can't be said that he is average-sized but not short either. Measurements during his civil service show that his height is 1.63 meters and his weight is fifty four kilograms. Nowadays, he is thirty three years old and if he is measured as a naked man he would weight either fifty six or fifty seven kilograms. His abdominal muscles started to become loose since two years. His head is rather big when compared to his body,

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1 The anxiety of the isolated man is a repeated theme in Atılgan's novels or short stories.

his forehead is wide, his hair, his eyes, his eyebrows, his mustache are dark brown; his face is skinny, a little bit downwards, but not as much as he saw in the mirror on the day when the lady coming with the late Ankara train had gone. His hands are small, nails are short, his shoulders and chest are narrow. He was born premature on the seventh month of his mother's pregnancy. In the year of 1930, 28<sup>th</sup> of November, his mother started to suffer child-birth pains. First, she waited a little bit, then she covered her hair and descended the stairs, shouting 'Bring the midwife, Ahmet Efendi, quick!' The midwife was at her home, they had come quickly, laid her down in the bed. 'I've got two more months to deliver, is it going to die again, the midwife?' said his mother. The midwife told his father that he should go out and prepare hot water. I have locked the main door. I have placed some water on the stove. She shouted once or twice as the water gets hot. The door was opened part way, the midwife asked for the water. She said, 'you've got a son now'. Soon she called me to the room. She swaddled the baby and was holding him in his hand, the baby was small as her hand. 'You should swaddle this in pure cotton and lie him down in the pearl box.' I had immediately whispered in his ear. That is how this unique name was given to the child" (Atılgan 1989: 12-13).

The very beginning of the novel gives significant clues about how Zebercet evolved into an isolated, odd person who cannot become a modern individual. It is implied at the beginning of the novel that he is an odd person who is almost destined to live his odd life in the same hotel where he was born. The first thing to imply this is the fact that he was a premature baby. An early born baby experiences the sudden change in his living conditions from the mother's womb to external world earlier than he is ready. This intensifies the first horror affecting the baby, the horror of being left the warm and secure environment of the mother's womb. This creates a suitable basis for a strong feeling of insecurity. Besides, the premature birth as it is called in medical literature, implies not being born but being thrown away from the womb, also implies death more than life for the baby. The narrator of the novel is aware of this fact as it mentions that a responsible behavior can be expected from the mother as a mature person much more than it can be expected from a unconscious baby in mother's womb (Atılgan, 2000).

Furthermore, as the nurse says, such a powerless, poor, little baby, who needs extra care should be given the name of Zebercet; a valuable gemstone similar with, but less valuable than emerald. Hence, this unordinary, odd name which turns into one of the most dominant sources of his being mocked in his mature life, is given to the baby. It is interesting that the name does not directly refer to a valuable stone, emerald, but refers to a *less valuable stone resembling* emerald in color. It is as if the feeling of

not being valuable and being the imitation of a valuable thing is intrinsic to Zebercet's birth. The concepts of "being quite the same but not really" and "inevitably and essentially being the second-hand copy of the 'original' or the 'real'" are significant discussions of post-colonial theory as Homi k. Bhabha brilliantly discusses (Bhabha, 1994). It is not a coincidence that Zebercet and the modernization process shares a common essential characteristics, and this commonality signifies a realm of intersection within which the borders between the personal and the political fades away.

The novel, however, is not a narrative of the "national allegory" that is supposed to be as an example of "the Third World literature". There are several reasons for arguing this: first, it is quite difficult to argue that Zebercet's story perfectly matches with the story of becoming a nation because it is difficult to talk about a monolithic process of the establishment of the nation-state. Although the purpose of construction a unified collective identity as the Turkish citizen was strongly stressed and became the core of the engineering social strategies and policies, there was actually more than one version of modernities during the early Republican period. One can follow three different but interrelated versions in the *Anayurt Oteli* since the process has quite different consequences for the population of the town (including the cleaning lady), for bureaucratic institutions of the state (including the trial, the Republic Day celebrations and the woman coming with the late Ankara train) and for Zebercet. The celebration of the Republic Day, the trial which was organized to declare his guilt and to decide how he is going to be punished, even the barber who shaves his mustache seems to be able to cope with the modernization process. The accumulation of their experiences as well as the way they negotiate with the whole process of transformation could be read as the signs of how central policies had come into being within the course of actual daily life. There is also another version of modernity which goes on hand in hand with the people's bargaining with modernity, and it can be defined as the bureaucratic or state modernity. Calling the process as a "bargaining" is inspired by Deniz Kandiyoti's conceptualization of "bargaining with patriarchy" (Kandiyoti, 1988) as the *Anayurt Oteli's* theoretical conception of the modernization process is strongly based on the assumption that republican modernization is a process whose different forms in addition to people's different strategies to cope with them coexist and clash with each other. The depiction of gender roles and especially the condition of women is an excellent realm to analyze such coexistence and clash.

The depiction women in the novel is based on a sharp division between certain binary oppositions like urban vs. rural, traditional vs. modern, liberated vs. dependent, active vs. passive. The way they were depicted is rather related with disclosing the clash and possible realms of antagonism both based on the above-mentioned oppositions and the class structure. These women are characterized

as the representative of two severely contrasting gender types while their mode of existence are mutually exclusive (obviously, the appearance of the woman coming with the late Ankara train is not the sole but the main reason behind Zebercet's murdering the cleaning woman). This makes the reader think that there is a contrast between the cultural codes and life styles of the "urban" (rather identified with the state or bureaucratic version) and "rural" (identified with the 'folk' version) of modernities. There is, however, a common point that makes both versions sustainable: the heavy and highly flexible determinant of patriarchal codes. The patriarchal web of social relations, therefore, defines the limits of modernization on a rather broader scale.

Another implication of Zebercet's name is that he should be protected just like a jewelry from the dangers of the outside. He should be kept in a special, protective synthetic womb to be able to survive. From this perspective, the pearl box has more than one meaning. First, the condition of inadequacy and powerlessness becomes the baby's most deterministic quality and later on demarcates his character as an adult man. He is neither going to be capable of performing a productive action or a meaningful speech to express himself to external world nor to be able to intervene with the external world so that he can freely shape his life. Secondly, until the constant order of his daily life is extraordinarily disturbed by the presence of the woman coming with late Ankara train, Zebercet never leaves the hotel, which had become the secure womb that he needs to feel safe and secure. It is also a shield protecting him from others' humiliation and oppression. Lastly, the hotel is the web that he cannot tear and take himself to outside, the thin layer of his existence as a premature person (Moran, 2002).

It is clear that the name is the metaphor of his oddness as well as it is the basic source of his constant humiliation shadowing his early childhood. Humiliation becomes the part of his existence since even his mother cannot desist from such behavior. The little Zebercet, for instance, wants to have lunch and his mother replies Moran, 2001 by saying that "Honey, the dish is almost ready, just be a little bit patient. Such a boy! He could not bear with nine months even in my womb"; a friend in the school, a powerful boy makes fun of him by saying "His mother delivered a boy, yet, Zebercet kneads the dough"; a prostitute woman calls him as "my little soldier" (Atılgan, 2000) when he was taken into the brothel from the window instead of the door. Until his ultimate reaction, Zebercet never ascribes an active role in the face of such behavior but he is obsessed with never ending inner murmurings of possible reactions. One example is his thoughts about beating the street seller, taking the revenge of being humiliated in different ways (Atılgan, 2000).

Sexual identity is another domain of his humiliation. He never experiences a 'real' sexual interaction, he was never 'really' loved by any woman, and he cannot become a 'real' man. In sum, his existence is not in accordance with the codes of sexual identity which operate in his cultural environment, the highly patriarchal codes of being a 'real' man sexually.

The woman coming with late Ankara train is the object of Zebercet's desire. She is described in the novel as follows: "She is about twenty six years old. She is tallish and has got big boobs. Her hair, her eyes are dark, her eyelashes are long, her eyebrows are shaped a little bit. Her nose is sharp, her lips are thin. Her face is fine and dark colored" (Atilgan, 2000). She is an urban woman, a stranger as her clothes and the way she behaves shows. She symbolizes the unreachable object of desire; she is completely unreachable as his isolated subjectivity and machine-like daily routine are considered. She is a "modern" woman who just passes by from the town and never comes back to the hotel. She is the only element that establishes a tie between Zebercet and external life; points his gaze towards the external world and pushes him to change. The machine so-called "Zebercet's daily, weekly, monthly routine" is broken on the day that she comes to the hotel while his life, awareness and mental status starts to change. He does not sleep that night with the fear of not hearing the watch's ringing in the morning, he goes out and changes his clothes, he tries to turn into someone else who fits the love of this stranger woman. In sum, he tries to construct himself, his presence at least according to urban, 'modern' codes. (Atilgan, 2000) However, he was never able to attract the attention of the woman; she does not notice him and never recognizes his feelings about her. He even cannot ask her name, in this way the woman becomes anonymous and nameless, absent in the frame of psychoanalysis. The woman does not come back, the desire is unsatisfied and the effort to change is unsuccessful. He cannot construct a life outside to hotel, outside the known and ordinary order of his daily life.

Moreover, Zebercet is either denied or degraded by two women (the cleaning woman and the prostitute) that he has conducted sexual intercourse. Moran points out that the degradation of the prostitute is the dominant theme of the communication when he says that "The important thing, however, is ridiculing words and laughs directed to Zebercet, the ridiculous situation when he tried to enter from the window which is placed beyond his height" (Moran, 2002). The denial of the cleaning woman is also another means of degradation. His intercourse with the cleaning woman and the cleaning woman herself are silent, and does not expressed by the utterance. The woman that he constantly rapes (the cleaning woman) is almost always in sleep and never wakes up during the sexual intercourse. It is, on one level, the absolute rejection of Zebercet's existence not only verbally but also sexually. The woman is also sexually incapable since she lacks the potential of biological productivity. In this sense,



she does not exist as a woman according to the codes of patriarchal culture and also according to the codes of Freudian analysis since gender identity is constructed by giving birth to a boy for woman in this theoretical framework. Before that happens, the woman cannot exist as a woman and lacks the relevant source of her identity. Moreover, the woman was degraded and abused before coming to hotel, possibly by her uncle. When she married first time she was sent back to her uncle's house because of not being virgin. His uncle beats her to learn who is responsible for this, but she admits that she does not know. When she married with an old man in her village, he also sends her back saying that she sleeps too much.

The narrative also implies that she was raped when she was a teenager by her uncle because she calls Zebercet “uncle” and says “Are you here, uncle?” when Zebercet enters her room for the first time. The notions of “uncle” and “agha” are meaningful both as metaphors of the continuum of childhood and adulthood sexual abuses (Atılgan, 2000) and of establishing the contrast between urban and rural, traditional and modern, active and passive forms of sexual behavior in addition to separating a sharp division between valuable and invaluable gender roles.

The first time Zebercet goes to her room and wakes her, she says that “Is it you, uncle?” and we learn about the incest relationship that she was accused to (Atılgan, 2000). Besides, the woman never wakes up, never mentions that she is aware of such sexual intercourse, she never overtly reacts to Zebercet’s raping and never actively joins the sexual intercourse or actively shares his sexual interest. For her, Zebercet is the “agha” but not a beloved man. Not overtly resisting to sexual intercourse but preserving her indifference, she develops a “blasé attitude” (Simmel, 1969) towards him. In this way, she stops to be his passive object of pleasure. Silence, implying passivity and total rejection of actual reality, turns into the realm of resistance and presence in the behavior of the cleaning woman. She neither denies nor accepts his power (sexually and culturally) and creates a space of her own in the silence. When Zebercet decides that he does not want her in sleep anymore and tries to wake her up, the sexual power turns into lack of it, he becomes incapable and becomes the object of his own incapableness. As a result, he kills the woman when he understands that he cannot be with her when she is awake. First, it should be mentioned that this is in accordance with the Irigaray’s denial of description of silence as the absence and constructing it as the realm of a specific existence for woman (Irigaray, 1985). Secondly, the lack of power and the passivity of the woman turn into an active resistance destroying the violent action targeting herself.

Two significant realms of womanhood, shaped by patriarchal cultural codes, the housework and

sexual intercourse are refused by two men and she was denied as a woman. It is quite significant that modern and traditional codes of culture operate in perfect harmony as there is a reconciliation in the definition of gender identities, and gender identity is the realm of cooperation instead of antagonism from the point of binary opposition between modernism and tradition. The cleaning woman, therefore, is denied not only because of being a “traditional” rural woman who has to deal with all the heavy burden of housekeeping in the hotel but also because of not being able to follow “modern” codes of sexual behavior as she refuses to participate actively to her uncle’s and Zebercet’s sexual actions. It is also remarkable that her refusal is actually a silent protest based on obliterating her existence as a whole and this becomes clear when Zebercet is obliged to control her breathing to realize whether she is still alive or not after raping her.

This means the destruction of the opposition between the cleaning woman and the woman coming with late Ankara train is constructed in the novel. One is the passive, the silent, the absence, the object and the other is the active, the presence, the speech, the subject. Such construction is in accordance with the modern construction of the modern self, the Cartesian ego, and Zebercet’s perception of the two women is formed from this perspective. However, as the opposition is destructed, which means the destruction of his subjective perception of the self and the two women, Zebercet destroys the physical existence of the cleaning woman and kills her. By doing this, he also kills the other woman, and his illusion is over in the night of murder. The words of “He rose up suddenly, the bell was ringing. Such a late time at night... It rang sharply three times more. Did not he see that the hotel was CLOSED? Zebercet waited. There was no voice. He covered himself with the quilt and lied down; closed his eyes. Who could have come? A fugitive? A late traveler? A man who fought over his wife in bed? A prostitute who was fired? The woman who came with the late Ankara train? He whispered: ‘Hell with her’” (Atılğan, 2000).

There is another unconventional act as Zebercet voyeurs the hotel rooms and sexual experiences of the hotel clients. Although this is an act of crossing over somebody else’s sexual confidentiality, it is a part of his daily routine to monitor life flowing through hotel window. He never dares to take active participation in daily life of the town as he dislikes being monitored, and becomes irritated and clumsy when others can watch him. A client of the hotel, the retired officer, for example, sits in the lobby of the hotel and reads newspapers or books. However, this irritates Zebercet since he cannot act in the way that he usually does in the face of another person. The source of irritation might be the fact that he himself monitors others and is perfectly aware of the motivating impulse of such actions. The motive of monitoring people is also related with the position of the cat and his killing of the cat. The cat is the

creature who is able to monitor him in the hotel while he peeks people. Atılgan points out this as “The man’s voice was hoarse, Zebercet could not get it. Zebercet’s face was tight, his mouth was half open, his eyes were narrowed. Yes, till morning... oh, don’t leave me, never leave me... oh, how I am yours... There was a squeak; he suddenly got up and walked, climbed the stairs slowly. There was a pair of eyes shining in front of him, on the ground. It was hotel’s cat. The cat rubbed itself against his leg when he was going to bathroom. He tried to kick it but missed the target. He opened the tap and washed his face” (Atılgan, 2000). The anger and aggressive behaviour is directed to the cat, but he is unable to hit the cat. Later, after killing the cleaning woman, he also kills the cat because it was the only witness of the murder. The cat also is the only witness of his ‘dirty’ sexuality, his raping the cleaning woman. The cat triggers his sexual desire due to its warmness, and touching the cat is among the objects of his desire. On the other hand, it becomes the object of the anger as well. Just as the object of his desire, he kills the object of his aggressiveness too by killing the cat.

Besides, watching sexual intercourse between the clients sexually provokes him and he begins to masturbate with the towel forgotten by the woman coming with the late Ankara train. The reason for sexual provocation as Moran argues is the mutuality of the sexual pleasure and its being expressed in language (Moran, 2002). Later, he masturbates with the towel and the pillow and uses the words that he had listened to imitate the expression of sexual pleasure by others’ words during masturbation. It seems the ability of expression is more dominant here than the sexual satisfaction, and it is the precondition of it. In this sense, Zebercet does not exist in the language level, where the identity is constructed according to Freudian and Lacanian terminology. Consequently, Zebercet's existence is just an illusion but is not a ‘real’ since he lacks the ability to effectively use the machine of language and cannot express his existence. Technically, the feelings or the psychological condition of Zebercet is not transmitted to the reader from his inside world. On the contrary, the reader had to interpret how various actions, events or conditions affect Zebercet's psychology, his ideas and thoughts. Considering this, it can be mentioned that the acts of killing is the killing of self-lives in other’s bodies and never existed as an independent ego. At the end of the novel, after he has talked to the man in the parked who knows his ‘illusionary family’, Keçecizadeler, and talks about his past, a rupture in Zebercet’s consciousness takes place. He recognizes the fictive existence and the subjective world that he had constructed are just an absence, he does not exist and at the end of such rupture, he destructs his physical body by hanging himself in the hotel.

He simultaneously kills his own incapability and his potential existence together with that woman someday in the future; the potential of coping with the external reality and being able to

establish intimate relationships and creating a meaningful life. The end of illusion, in sum, signifies the end of his ability to bear the heavy burden of his mundane life in the hotel. Furthermore, he also takes the revenge of all sexual humiliation he had faced throughout his life. The act of killing is an external and an internal action at once since it creates real consequences from the point of both external daily reality surrounding Zebercet and his inner reality since it means killing his self, his alter ego and the fantasizing inner child all at once. It also transforms the way he attributes a meaning to his existence and his external reality. Both of them drastically changes after the act of murdering. Such drastic transformation, with specific reference to Zebercet's own interpretation of himself and the external world, refers a highly dystopian perspective and a pessimistic foresight about the future of a certain version of modernization. He, actually, is the only person in the novel who asks questions about the course of daily reality surrounding himself. He tries to create a genuine meaning and a new conception of terms like "intimacy", "sincerity", "existence" instead of trying to play with already existing codes. He also looks for "integrity" not only in his existence but also in the relationships he would establish with the external world and the quest of integrity becomes the source of his impotence and clumsiness. It, nevertheless, results in an absolute demolishment of himself and the "world", and implies a certain mode of modernization is doomed to be annihilated without the opportunity of actually consolidating itself. This version, considering specific qualities attributed to Zebercet, was already very fragile, was in need of special care and effort to survive as it was depended on synthetic conditions of existence like the womb of his mother, the "pure cotton swaddle" and the hotel itself.

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