

## Postmodernism Gone Wild: Alev Alatlı's *Schrödinger's Cat*<sup>1</sup>

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Alev Alatlı is one of the most erudite of all the contemporary Turkish writers.<sup>3</sup> Her novels are pervaded with a profound sense of philosophical inquiry and critical insight concerning the world we live in. She draws upon an eclectic mix of Western modes of knowledge, Eastern philosophies, ancient and modern Turkish customs, folklore, and myths, and also displays a unique talent of fusing the intricate theories of Quantum physics with the socio-political ideologies of our time. She presents in her fiction a sense of living in a world whose foundations have been shaken, and where national and personal identity appears in wholly decentered forms. Her characters, trying to make sense of their anti-utopic world, and its violent forms of oppression, experience a process of disenchantment from traditional structures of belief. Had her work been translated she would, no doubt, have been acclaimed as one of the foremost thinkers of our time.

Her massive two volume novel *Schrödinger's Cat*, published in 1999, attests to this with its unique philosophical insight into the contemporary Turkish society. It is a remarkable fusion of the origins of ancient Turkish culture that date thousands of years back to the Asiatic plains where the first Turkish empires and their cultural forms flourished, with the diverse range of the theoretical interpretations of Quantum physics

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and postmodern theories. The negative and foreboding implications of the Postmodern condition today, rendered through the supposedly universal but in fact the fragmentary, and exclusionary logic of identity in the novel, find their most explicit expression in the first volume, while the second volume replaces a sense of hope and new possibilities of redemption with a literary recourse to our galactic origins, and the ancient Turks, known as the Celestial or Sky Turks,<sup>4</sup> (Gök Türk) who helped found their culture upon the holistic model of the universe as observed and recorded by their astronomers. According to this non-dualistic model, which they called the Law of the Skies, everything is interconnected, and separation between human and non-human worlds is unthinkable. The fact that Quantum Mechanics has revealed this model to comprise reality at the subatomic level shows that the Sky Turks were quite advanced in their scientific explorations. Thus the novels's references to their ancient wisdom blended with the recent Quantum experiments are offered as a solution to the fragmented nature of present day societal structures.

The first volume, entitled *Nightmare*, is a self-conscious investigation of the limits and the visible paradoxes of the Postmodern condition in present-day Turkish society from the perspective of the 2020s. This volume attacks the Postmodern from within its own rhetorical sign posts. It is perhaps the only text in the form of fiction that challenges the postmodern subversion of the truth value of the grand narratives which attempt to explain the world in terms of an over-reaching truth. *Nightmare* presents a Postmodern disutopia, but this is a totally negative form of postmodernism which appears as a tyrannic force of oppression in the novel. Therefore the first volume should be read as a cautionary tale against the provisional formulations of postmodernist ideology. It exposes the inherent political perils of this ideology's privileging of decentering our national identity, cultural continuity and unity, and political stability. It opens with a trial case of the major character İmre Kadızade, who has been accused of murdering her niece Revolution, in Adrionople Reformatory founded by Amnesty International. We read that the world has been forcefully united under the banner of the New World Order the founder and president of which is called The Grand Master, and who has authorized the trained "Achievers" (vasıl), "Devotees" (salik), "Disciples" (mürid) and "Aspirants" (talip) to announce the "Final Truth" to the rest of the planet. Turkey is divided into newly created political states with their specific borders, political leaders and citizens in keeping with the totalitarian system of the New World Order. The aim of this Order is to make the divided new nations blend into a new system called "Being in Oneness." Those who resist are subjected to genetic annihilation. There are of course the rebel rousers, labelled as the "Uncolonizables," who fight against this

oppression. Alev Alatlı calls this new order “Postmodern Fascism,” and the system of rule as “The Holy Coalition of the Grand Master.” Obviously the title has ironic echoes of the present European Union. The one and only power that can defy this system is *Schrodinger’s Cat*.<sup>5</sup> Being both dead and alive Schrodinger’s cat stands for the logic of “both” as opposed to the tyrannic Coalition’s “either/or” logic.

Nightmare follows the story of the former psychotherapist İmre Kadızade who has been sentenced to a program of re-cycling by the Amnesty International court. Her trial takes place in Adrianople Reformatory (today’s Edirne in Turkey) which is now part of the new state known as the Republic of Eastern Thrace. Her defence constitutes the novel’s major narrative. Using a holofomer, a device to project 3-dimensional images, İmre Kadızade explains to the court the political, economic and cultural make-up of former Turkey within which she grew up. Hence the cross-references to the major socio-political events of the Turkish history in the second half of the 20th century that have shaped Imre’s identity and her historical and political consciousness. These events are also presented as a nightmare concerning her situation. İmre Kadızade is an “Aspirant” in the novel. The “Aspirants” are made to repeat over and over the key concepts of the New World Order for the purposes of getting thoroughly indoctrinated. Among these repeated terms are: Grand Master, Absolute Consciousness, Unified Egalitarian Doctrine, Coalition, The Way, Uniform Individuals, Re-purification, Submission, Unitary World, Wealth, Western, European, Grudger, Rich, Sexy, Liberal, Economic Mind, Capitalist, Individualism, Progressive, and Rationalism. Needless to say the repetition of these concepts, that constituted and justified the Western civilization’s dominance of other cultures throughout the centuries, creates a sense of ironic estrangement from their very meanings. “Aspirants,” like İmre Kadızade from former Turkey, are made forcefully aware of their “otherness” and difference in their re-programming. Although postmodern theory rejects binarity, hierarchy and unitary forms of knowledge in favor of a more plural concept of difference, here it has proven the opposite. Here the Postmodern has turned against itself celebrating what it thoroughly rejected, such as closure, teleology, universalization and authority represented by the Postmodern organization of the Holy Coalition, pointing to the western wish for universal domination. Separation of Turkey into new nation states, for example, shows the inherent dangers within the postmodern privileging of historical plurality and cultural multiplicity. Therefore the repetitions of the key terms help create a sense of horror in the reader. Run by the principles of the “Economic Mind,” the Holy Coalition’s sovereignty of the planet has become an absolute nightmare for the rest of the people who are marginalized as the Uncolonizables. This negative reformulation of

postmodernism as a totalitarian ideology also aims to shock the reader further into the nightmarish world of the narrative. In this respect there is a deliberate confusing of postmodern thought with its unresolved contradictions. Is this how postmodernism perceived in Turkey? Maybe the literary conundrum here leads to this question. However, İmre Kadızade will gradually come to realize the contradiction of the authoritarian order, she is being re-programmed to accept, as the only egalitarian system.

One of the most outstanding references in the novel is the explanation of the state of being pre-human. İmre Kadızade is being brainwashed to accept this as the condition of the “Unfortunate Ones” from whose genetic make up individual differences are systematically erased. Yet İmre’s profound knowledge of the quantum theories, which she displays with specific references to the work and ideas of famous quantum physicists and mathematicians, and her deep understanding and critical assessment of philosophy, politics, economy and other disciplines, by which she explains her situation, stand out in the court room as the greatest challenge to the Western attitude of suppressing her identity as pre-human. Subjecting her to Amnesty International’s re-programming to become full- human creates a brilliant postmodern parody of the Western mindset in the text. During the trial process İmre Kadızade is fortunate enough to meet the Rebels who resist and threaten the authoritarian system of the New World Order. The mysterious Black Kalpak Man (the Man with a black headgear) introduces her to “The Reconstructors” whose sole task is to restore the sense of dignity of self, historical consciousness and social awareness to the now oppressed Turks by using the theories of the new physics, astronomy and astro-physics to prove their point. The numerous historical references to Turkish legends, customs and traditions, to the Sky Turks’ astronomers, and to modern Turkish history, are used to prepare the reader for what follows in the second volume. The Reconstructors in Nightmare try to prevent İmre Kadızade from being an easy prey to the mind control methods of the Holy Coalition. They also attempt to erase the impact of re-programming she undergoes. The Reconstructors’ main aim is to make the people aware of the fact that the Parliament of Achievers are working to “moronize” the Turkish “Sufferers” otherwise referred to as the Oppressed. We read that the Parliament of Achievers has determined that the Oppressed are suffering from aphasia. İmre Kadızade escapes this end, because she is using Fuzzy Logic. Therefore she boldly declares that, “there can be nothing belonging to this world which can be proven 100% true or 100% false” (127). İmre Kadızade thinks in accordance with the multivariable principles of Fuzzy Logic, which in Turkish has come to be accepted as “ruffled logic” concerning the indeterminable nature of

reality. “In my cubistic world” she says, “Picasso, Lenin, Freud, Prophet Mohammed and Man are real, as real as Hawking. As real as socialism, capitalism, liberalism. All of them are real. They demand interest, and responsibility” (123). She explains what seems so incomprehensible and paradoxical about Turkish society to the West by using such a conceptual framework drawn from Quantum theory. Turkey itself stands as a symbol of the logic of “both” defying any either/ or category about its very nature. All the references to specific socio-political events in the late 20th century Turkey also come to be discussed from the perspectives of “Fuzzy Logic” of the new physics. As İmre says to her nuclear physicist friend Professor Erkani: “*Schrödinger’s Cat* is like Turkey. Believe me, I am not worried for its being both dead and alive! If death is one extreme end and life another, I do not find what is in between that strange. Similarly I do not find light behaving both as a wave and as particles that strange. In fact this sounds quite logical to me. My problem is with black and white” (119).

Little anecdotes scattered throughout İmre’s narrative, about the old Turkish myths, her family background, Anatolian traditions, life in Istanbul, and discussions on Chaos theory with reference to Islamic theology, along with pervasive reference to quantum physics, dominate İmre Kadizade’s defence. Holographic projections of her entire life enact the old scenes for further impact on the judge. Imre Kadizade defends her present condition by condemning the state of affairs in old Turkey. She says that there was no direction, no specific ideology there:

Old Turkey lacked political principles, theories, ideals or philosophy...  
it had no foresight; its leadership lacked intellectual principles. The  
culture of Old Turkey was dominated by emotions. The major emotion  
was fear. As a citizen of a country which adopted anti-ideology as its  
only ideology, and which lacked political philosophy, I was like a boat  
rocked by the mercy of the waves. (325).

In this way she tries to justify the reason behind the death of her niece, Revolution. Her severe criticism of Turkey’s political stance finds its final justification in the nightmare of its fragmentation and its people’s state of aphasia. On a larger scale İmre’s narrative points to the systematic reduction of the peoples of the world into automations launched by the Western program of global unification. Thus the first volume, *Nightmare*, ends with the final division of Turkey into many states which have accepted the way the holy Coalition has determined for them, with their willing submission to the rule of the Grand Master. But the Reconstructors send her a final signal: “Don’t be afraid” (618).

The second volume, entitled *Dream*, opens with a magnificent narrative of the creation of our galaxy and the planets that the Reconstructors have simulated in their underground headquarters. İmre Kadizade is witnessing a superb display of three-dimensional cosmic show. The important minds of ancient Turkish civilizations have been cloned to reenact the past Turkish history. We are taken into the time and realm of Khubla Khan where the Turkish astronomer Uluğ Bey, whose work on the planets had greatly influenced the 17th century European scientists, and Shoujing discuss the nature of the galactic formations. We also learn how the Turks have founded their culture and values upon the original creation in the universe and lived in accordance with its principles. İmre Kadizade also learns the beauty of holistic way of thinking, and the fact that the Reconstructors have taken the Blue Crane as their symbol of liberation and freedom just as the ancient Turks have always revered this bird. They have adapted the inscription from the Orkhun Script: “Unless the sky collapses on itself above, unless the land is devastated below, who can disrupt your country, your customs Turkish nation?” (53). They say that if there is going to be total annihilation of this planet it must be the natural result of the astronomical reality, not result from the Achievers’ destruction of the ozone layer, of their ongoing assaults on the seas, air and land. Theirs (the Reconstructors) is the nationalism of the Blue Crane. In the cosmic show of the death and birth of the stars, and supernovas, Imre Kadizade learns that their ideology is grounded in the sovereignty of the Heavens, and that we all have descended from star dust:

“We had told you that we have adapted the fundamental sovereignty of the skies” said the Crane man. This is a reconstruction just like the Blue Mongols and the Celestial Chinese (sic Turks) have founded their empires upon the reflections of the skies, constructed their cities to reflect the reliefs of the Universe. The principle is similar. The goal is to live in harmony with the Everlasting and Eternal Reality, not to fall into conflict with the law of the Blue Sky. We get more and more familiar with the Law. Uluğ Bey gave us the addresses of the Heavenly Bodies. We started from that point and brought the law to the point of investigating the physical qualities of the stars. (204)

*Schrödinger's Cat* is a masterpiece with its self-conscious critique of the present forms of knowledge based on duality. It offers a textual model of holistic thinking by paradoxically contextualizing the inherent dangers of totalitarian idea of unity that must not be confused with holism. It can be read as a tale of disutopia followed by utopia in its two volumes, or as a call to responsibility even in degraded political and social conditions it depicts. As İmre Kadizade finally realizes, if there is going to be a new

beginning towards more holistic and ecologically viable forms of existence this can be achieved only by submitting to the rule of the Heavenly Reality on Earth, and only when we can learn to live in total harmony with the Everlasting power of the skies. Therefore the Reconstructers repeatedly underline the fact that their nationalism is grounded in the acceptance of the Law of the Skies and that their ideology is one that is not static but is in a constant process of being reconstructed in the light of new scientific discoveries. The member of the Reconstructers, the General, turns to İmre Kadizade at this point, and looking into her eyes speaks: “We may have been thoroughly immersed in dirt on the ground, but here underground we have turned our eyes to the stars! Therefore we tell you İmre, Do NOT be afraid” (54). As a brilliant novel that disrupts the very premises of postmodernism itself, *Schrödinger’s Cat*, therefore, achieves its aim in redirecting attention to the importance of reconnecting to our planetary ecosystem from which we have been disconnected, as well as to our galactic roots by a narrative recourse to the ancient wisdom of the Sky Turks.

## NOTES

- 1 *Schrödinger’s Cat* (Schrödingerin Kedisi) was published in 1999 in two volumes as *Kabus* (Nightmare), and *Rüya* (Dream). Alatlı, Alev. *Schrödinger’in Kedisi* (Kabus). 1999. Istanbul: Alfa Yayınları, 2001; *Schrödinger’in Kedisi* (Rüya). Istanbul:2001.
- 2 Hacettepe University, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyeti Bölümü, Beytepe, Ankara.
- 3 Some of Alatlı’s other books include, *Yaseminler Tüter mi, Hâlâ?* (1985); *Viva La Muerte*(1992); *NukeTürkiye* (2001); *Aydınlanma Değil, Merhamet!* (2004) (Two vols.).
- 4 The Gök Türk Empire (Celestial or Sky Turks) from 5th to 8th centuries ruled over 18 million km<sup>2</sup> territory in Middle Asia. They had formulated the first alphabet (the Orkhun script) and had a highly developed culture. They called themselves Sky Turks because of their belief of originally coming to Earth from the Skies and also because of their blue eye color that markedly differentiated them from the other nations in Middle Asia.
- 5 “Schrödinger’s Cat” is a metaphor for the paradox of Schrödinger’s famous wave equation. There is a cat inside a box which has a device that releases poisonous gas. This release is a random event representing the radioactive decay of an atom. One cannot look inside the box to determine if the gas is released or not. The gas is either released or not released after the experiment starts. So, the question of what happened inside the box is answered, according to classical physics, as either the cat is dead or alive, but according to quantum mechanics the cat, like a wave function, is in a position of being both dead and alive with both possibilities having equal weight.