

# *Lying Down to Die: Breaking the Mould*

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**Abstract** Agaoglu's *Lying Down to Die* (1973) fictionalizes the early decades of the new Turkish Republic through Aysel and her classmates. It offers a comprehensive context to explore the identity formation processes for women against the background of the modernizing project in a conservative context. In two and a half hours in a hotel room, her attempts to trace her past acts as a purgation process in which she discovers her bodily self, which she has suppressed in her efforts to build up her "imagined" identity. This essay aims to explore Aysel's purgation process with references to the social context within which she was raised.

**Keywords:** Turkish novel; Adalet Agaoglu; *Lying Down to Die*

Adalet Agaoglu (1929- ) a leading contemporary Turkish novelist, reminds one of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in her *Lying Down to Die* (*Olmeye Yatmak*, 1973), which is the first novel of her trilogy *Hard Times* (*Dar Zamanlar*)<sup>1</sup>. As in the case of Saleem Sinai, Agaoglu's novel tells the story of Aysel whose life runs parallel to the history of the young Turkish Republic. However, she establishes this parallelism from the woman's perspective unlike Rushdie whose protagonist is a man writing from the center of the patriarchal discourse. Aysel, an academician, locks herself in a hotel room in Ankara to prepare for her death. She tries to come to terms with her recent crisis—a sexual liaison with one of her students. In this process, her mind travels through her personal history, and merges into the national history:

Agaoglu gives a panoramic picture of the early and later years of the modern Turkish Republic through Aysel, concentrating on the people in her immediate surroundings who were born and raised in the previous Islamic traditions. These same individuals were caught up in national change. They were suddenly expected to live within a totally different framework of the modern, secular, and democratic system. These changes and expectations produced conflicts and tension between this generation and their children who were regarded as the future of the new republic. (Birlik 9)

The reader can also find a strong parallelism between the writer's own life and the new era of the Republic. In fact, the novels in the trilogy trace through the lives of the 1938 graduates of a village school into the 1960s and the course of things in the characters' lives echo the social context Agaoglu herself lived through. Her early childhood years overlapped with the early years of the Turkish Republic and the nation-building project which had a profound impact on her writing. Agaoglu created most of her characters against the background of the socio-political context of the new Turkish Republic, which is as important as the characters themselves in the author's novels. Other issues she persistently explores are women rights in a conservative context; "the correlation between the community and the individual; the social and financial handicaps that trap or demonize the individual; the cultural metamorphoses of Turkish society" in the new era; "hypocrisy and double standards both in the right and the left wing groups; political oppression; class and national identity"(Birlik 9).

As stated above, the novel traces the 1938 graduates (eight students) of a provincial primary school near Ankara till the late sixties against the background of the new secular regime. The trilogy traces also the quest of these graduates for a stable frame of thought. It gives a panoramic picture of the early decades of the new Turkish Republic, through Aysel, now a university teacher, and her classmates. When the novel starts, she is at a hotel room after an emotional and intellectual crisis triggered by a sexual intercourse with one of her students. We learn from her inner monologue that her long walk in the deserted streets of Ankara early in the morning took her to this hotel room where she is planning to commit suicide; and where she moves back and forth in time and tries to make sense of her present "self" against the background of the society. In two and a half hours in this room, past and present events in her personal history merge into the social context she lives in; and her attempts to trace her past acts as a purgation process in which she discovers her bodily self, which she has suppressed in her efforts to build up her "imagined" identity.

Due to her crisis, she loses her spatial and temporal discipline. She is captured by her memories of the graduation ceremony populated with Dundar, the pathetic primary school teacher; and the other bureaucrats of the small town Nallihan, as well as the local people. These characters are scaled against their willingness to respond to the new Republic's westernizing project, which aimed to change the previous conservative agrarian community into a modern industrial one blending this metamorphosis with a secular and progressive national identity. Therefore, the history of the new Turkish Republic acts as a background text while the foreground text tells the story of the characters who experienced these social changes at individual level.

Although the narrating voice is sympathetic to the new system, it cannot turn

a blind eye to the inadequacy of both its supporters and the ordinary people to understand the essence of it. The novel gives an honest picture of the community as a whole, which is quite heterogeneous: there are Kemalists (supporters of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the new Republic after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of the World War I), leftists, traditionalists, nationalists, the ones who imitate the West at any cost, religious radicals.... Graduation ceremony is functionally used in the novel as an arena for bringing together different segments of the small town and for dialogizing these characters. Therefore, another thing that the novel problematizes is the tension between those who support the new regime and those who choose to stay in the margins of it. Thus, it also voices the silenced groups like the small shop owners or the villagers who feel awkward in the modernizing process. With their uncritical acceptance and class conscious elitism, some of the supporters of the new ideology get very close to imposing authority figures. In their obsession to put modernizing ideals into practice at any cost, they cannot go beyond parodying this ideology and turn into puppet figures, unable to create sympathy in the readers. The ironic gap between how they act and how they should reaches its peak in the graduation ceremony when Dunder, obsessed with “opening a window into the West,”<sup>2</sup> forces his students to dance polka at the expense of putting their parents into an inferior position in the eyes of the community, who regard this western dance as immoral and humiliating as the dancers are supposed to touch the opposite sex. These parents feel dishonored, but in the face of the command “to be civilized” they submit to the authority of the school master. They were deeply aware of an immoral conduct but it was not their fault, they submit as they were forced to do so (19)<sup>3</sup>. The reason why Dunder is so insistent on polka is that dance in the western style becomes fashionable in the capital. (Ironically, he is not aware that polka is a traditional dance of another nation.) New dance schools open, people go to jazz clubs of the big hotels, as Aysel says in an ironic tone of voice: “we who live according to the western traditions and code of conduct, pity the ones who don’t know, don’t care about these patterns and codes” (81). Dunder encourages his student of village origin, Ali, to go to a big city and become a member of the urban community through education. Dunder takes a secret pleasure out of his departure despite the fact that Ali’s mother needs him desperately in cultivating her land. As in Ali’s case, he tries to lift the village boys into the “higher” status of the city children, since for him, this is what modernization commands.

Here it should be underlined that the novel is critical of such characters like Dunder who act on their half-digested Kemalist principles rather than these principles themselves: They create an imaginary gaze which they falsely identify either with Atatürk or with the West, and try to live up to the expectations of this gaze monitoring

the improvement of the country. A case in point is: this progressive ideology says that the villagers are the masters of the nation, a saying which obviously aims to raise the self-esteem of the rural people, whereas the bureaucrats' approach to these "masters" is very class conscious and elitist. They try to "educate" their masters. Or when a district governor sees a villager on donkey passing through in one of the main streets of the capital, he rebukes the villager. The same district governor suggests that they should put statues of naked women in the middle of the town as in the European cities but is opposed by the prominent figures of the town as it would not be proper in a Moslem country. Besides, they say, they have more urgent problems like lack of water supplies, roads, coal, gas, salt, and so on (228). Ironically, they arrange a marriage for this governor thinking that he is sexually aroused. Again, Dundar idealizes the government leaders and transforms them into mythical superhuman figures who "don't eat and drink, don't sleep, and don't go to toilet" (128). For him whatever these "elders" say is good, so everybody should do the task given him by the elders (129).

Against these elitist bureaucrats, the novel also hints that there is another group of bureaucrats who are genuinely interested in the idea of improving the society. However, it does not allocate much space for such bureaucrats. The novel also voices the other side of the coin, how the new system is perceived by the people who are in the margin of this ideology. They move from one epistemology into another one just like a snake shedding its skin, or resist this transition. Their diverse positions to the changes around themselves lead into a persistent and unresolved conflict with the autocrats. These people live in a province of Ankara, but this spatial closeness doesn't guarantee that they are really "close" to Ankara, the new capital city. They were raised in the strictly traditional context of the Islamic order and, now, are spiritually too far from the center. One of them, Salim, Aysel's father and a small shop owner, cannot bring himself to practice the western patterns of life. In the beginning he was one of the committed supporters of the new republic, in fact, he used to feel proud of being one of the soldiers who accompanied Ismet Pasha, the present prime minister, to Ankara in war years. Now, he cannot articulate but there is something in the new regime which he cannot own; he is discontent with it for a reason which he cannot define: *is* it because he had to send his daughter to Ankara for her further education or because his son is literate? Whatever the reason is, he feels trapped whenever the governor talks about a developing country with a bright future. He cannot make sense of the new relation patterns in the new system. When he sees some are rising in the social ladder through flattery, his sense of suffocation intensifies even more, and he becomes more negative and hostile towards the new project and its representatives. He is aware that small shop owners were not referred to in any of the official speeches, it seemed as if he had not existed (49-50). As a result, Salim shrinks in his own eyes

day by day, as the narrator states “nobody could understand his smallness, which gets bigger and bigger” (49).

1938 graduates are raised and educated in such a social atmosphere and reflect these immense social changes at individual level. Their generation was looked upon as the hope of the new republic; and much more than they could accomplish has been expected from them. Accordingly, they do everything in order to be “useful” to the country and for Ali, for example, “the urge to do something good for the country developed stronger than his urge to fill his stomach” (280). Later, Aysel and Omer get engaged in the presence of dead Atatürk, thinking that they got permission from him.

In the new regime, women were encouraged to leave their traditional status as submissive creatures and to hold important positions in society. Educating children, particularly girls, from the rural areas was given a special attention. However, another thing that is emphasized in the novel is their failure to understand the equality of the sexes, which means being “brothers and sisters” with each other, that is, suppression of sexual identities. They envisage a kind of equality in which both sides are desexed. For Dundar, one of the things that makes one a good citizen is this suppressed sexuality. He tells his students that if they take their girl friends “in a brotherly way,” the girls will accept them “as a brother” too (40).

Aysel tries to establish herself despite the traditions which are in clash with what she is taught at school: when her brother hides himself from the police for his illegal activities in a nationalistic right wing faction, her mother is desperate as she has lost “her only son, her only hope.” Aysel is deeply hurt and feels herself like a forgotten thing in an ambiguous corner of the house. During summer holidays, she is forced to wear a headscarf, which is in contradiction to her Kemalist ideals. To be able to continue her education, Aysel makes herself invisible at home not to remind his father that she attends school, although she has grown up. She submits when her brother forbids her to listen to western music. She de-feminizes herself all her life trying to look ugly to escape a possible arranged marriage. To make the matter worse, as an educated girl with different interests, she is alienated from the other girls. As a residue of her teenage years, in her mature years, too, she always puts her identity as an intellectual woman to the foreground: when she is with the cleaning woman, or at the hairdresser’s, she somehow manages to squeeze a reference to her studies with “I am in a hurry, I should attend a conference today” kind of remarks.

Aysel becomes an academician in this new system. Hers is a life lived at the expense of her “self” as she devoted herself to the incorrectly understood ideals suppressing her sexuality and bodily self. The reader fluctuates between the naive submissive girl and Aysel the academician. Aysel’s intellectual crisis seems to be a kind of confrontation with the complacency of the bureaucrats who believe that

everything goes alright in the country: “everything seemed alright. But it should not seem so. There should be a protest if not much has been achieved in the thirty years. We should encounter this ‘nothingness.’ We should fall into a pit in full speed. This fall should expose its real nature” (101). She gradually loses her sense of belonging to the intellectual class: “the things she learned were always in clash with what she sees in life. The desire to swim was getting intense but the water surrounding her was getting higher and higher too” (334).

She confronts the suppressed suspicion in herself and problematizes whether she has really believed the fact that “the hand that made the history did make the virtuous army of Dundar the teacher” or was it part of their mission to believe it? (303) Was this the result that was aimed at by the Kemalist project? If Ataturk says that “men cannot be free in a nation where women are suppressed,” “when one half of the nation is chained, can the other half fly in the sky? Our failure as a nation stems from our mistreatment of women,” or “whatever good in this world is the work of women,” she cannot understand, then, why as women they curse men to loneliness. Although they have struggled desperately against the traditions to live up to the expectations of the new ideology, why couldn’t they establish genuinely equal relationships with men? What have they done wrong on the way to achieve their ideals?

As they are the first generation to be educated in the new secular system, with them “a new generation is born,” a generation which has a grand mission to realize. Ali, one of her classmates, asks: “Being ignorant of everything, we learned how to and how much we should love our country, our nation. This has turned into something like a deep passion... For what ends do we love our country and nation so much?” (319) Very suitably, Aysel contrasts their case and that of the new generation: “nobody gives important tasks or missions to children nowadays. It is left to their choice whether to do something or not. They enjoy the idleness or lack of a belief in anything” (183).

She is a leftist at heart and her sympathies lie with the peasants and the underprivileged, which is incarnated in her choice of a lover: she falls in love with Engin, a student of hers who comes from such a background. She is also aware that Engin acts in accordance with the half-digested communist ideals and patterns. Through Engin, Marxists, too, are criticized; and Aysel says that they have fallen into “hopelessness and despair” (214). “The sweet made by the Russian Intelligentsia choked (paralyzed) themselves before anybody else.” Their case in Turkey is not different, either. In her practice, she takes sides with these people, but she can also see that rather than a new window for a new framework of thought, she waits hopefully in front of a closed door.

Still, she discovers her neglected “self” through Engin, her student. This

discovery challenges her position as a university teacher, as the one who is supposed to know: “without knowing herself first what can one know?” (345) This sexual attraction seems to stand for a kind of rupture in her personal history, a metaphor for breaking her previous mould which she can no longer squeeze herself into. She draws “a different kind of pleasure” from it. She wants to explore her body more and more in her sexual awakening in which she feels “vital, full,” a woman and a human being at the same time (175). Very suitably, after the first physical contact, her shirt is stained with blood (a metaphorical loss of virginity), although she has been married for many years.

In the hotel room, she is captured by crying fits, which, for her, was a sign of weakness before. Now she has a deep desire to act out of the boundaries that have been imposed upon her since her primary school years. She stays naked, which seems to be an effort to get rid of the imposed identity over her. In the shower, she wants to discard all the segments in her identity with the help of the water and to see what lies beneath. After the shower, she feels that she breaks the mould that covers her and expands into the soil itself, but she is not sure whether the soil will accommodate her (342). When she gets out of the shower, Aysel liberates herself from the position of “the gazed”; or by going beyond the constructed identity of “illuminated Turkish woman” she changes into the identity of any woman who doesn’t have the responsibility of a grand mission to be achieved at any cost. She does not commit suicide in the end, and leaves the hotel room feeling revitalized both in physical and intellectual terms. However, whether she will go back to her life with her husband or she will start a new life on her own is left ambiguous.

## Notes

1. The other novels in her trilogy are: *Bir Dugun Gecesi*, (*A Wedding Night*, 1979) and *Hayir*, (*No*, 1987).
2. Translations are mine
3. See Adalet Agaoglu. *Olmeye Yatmak (Lying Down to Die)*. Istanbul :Yapi Kredi Yayinlari, 1994.

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