

Europe – A Grand Narrative

I have been working on this text over and over and started to rewrite every time I felt the need of saying and stating more. Europe and Europeanness and to become a European, to be part of such gathering and to be a member of such state of belonging evoke many fields of understanding. That has been the challenge of this text and the excitement of the process.

Avrupa-lı-las-tı-r-abil-di-k-leri-m-iz-de-n-mi-sin-iz? (Are you one of among whom we were able to make to become European) is a collaborative work by Özlem Günyol and Mustafa Kunt, which has been realised as an installation in Frankfurt am Main, last year. The work's location was specially chosen by the artists to be in the neighbourhood of the train station, where it is overly active and crowded as well as populated by people from various countries and social backgrounds. Though the economic background similarity brings these groups to live together in the same quarter. The installation has been placed on a façade of a modernist building in that neighbourhood and was an attraction for the passer-bys especially for the Turkish (reading) community. The question asked in Turkish was posed to the Turkish community living in the area, hence specifying its subject matter or content of the piece. On the other hand, it could be grasped as some text related to Europe if one tried to read or as an advertisement campaign. Günyol and Kunt have solved this confusion by placing the second part of the work in their solo exhibition 'Be-cause' at Basis, accompanying an explanatory text. The installation in Turkish displays the production of the word step by step, which becomes a sentence in its translation to other Latin based languages. The word in its syllables which are actually the suffixes propose a timely question starting from the root of the word: Europe.

In Turkish language, production of words is a process of construction. Starting with the source/root word one can add annexes, suffixes and prefixes to produce new words in the related field of the root. For instance göz means eye and gözlük is produced by adding the '-lik' means glasses and gözlükçü is the person who produces glasses and trades them. The structure is also founded on putting the vowels in rhyme and in relation to the requirements of the procedure of producing words. In accordance with this example, Turkish enables to produce long words with annexes, suffixes and prefixes. Through the elementary school years, one gets to learn how to read and write, how to make up words with suffixes and to deconstruct them into the smallest possible syllables or to add as many syllables as possible to make up a meaningful complex word. The competitions of making the longest meaningful word mostly end up with a word on a country and its nationalisation. Thus the longest possible word is mostly related with the norms of belonging and participation, on a nationalist level.* Günyol and Kunt takes this word-play into account and positions Europe, where the plain word game becomes a political output, investigating the norms of belonging and participation as a European. Their positioning of the word-play is taken further to a continent rather than staying with a country and its national aspects. The juxtaposition reflects on their background of receiving Western culture and becomes a projection of a grand narrative. Hence, they bring back the notion of grand narrative, of which conflicts with the aspects of post-modern discourse, that today is announcing its decay. Thus Günyol and Kunt mark the existence of such narratives and such scales of reception that are taking place today.

The piece produced in Turkish indicates certain tendencies that have taken place in Turkey about Europe and Western World. In other words, Turkey and its relation to modernity and Westernisation have been marked with European means of development and living. Turkey, founded in the 20th century, as a country with fresh breathes, with an urge to catch what is happening next, has been (mainly) fulfilled with tendencies of becoming a modern country. The questions of 'where to go' and 'what to follow' have shaped the development strategies from the beginning of its foundation, and Europe has been received as the source of development: cultural and technological castle of the new, the better, and the best of all that happens. The lateness of starting up anew, from the beginning of founding every single aspect of production and living has caused a certain anxiety and excitement to evolve into something different. West became the object of desire for Turkey: it would always move further and stay ungraspable. Within that rapid urge of development in Turkey, came the melancholy of the train that is missed and will never be caught. (The feeling of sitting at the train station, looking after the missed train on its track...**) The national declaration of facing towards the West and employing the notions of Western development has resulted in the in-between state of belonging, where on the one side stood history and traditions and on the other side development and modernisation. Today, the pattern is prolonged by European Union and Turkey's candidate position.

Since 2001, the integration of European requirements has been reshaping the country and its legislation, its social structures. The change that is introduced as a must is on productive and challenging levels. The required change shall be a rapid and an effective one in order to fulfil the expectations of the capacity of 'self-realisation' in liberal sense. It is also a continuation of the modernist tendencies in a way that becoming a member of European Union will be the legalisation of Turkey's 'modern' social state. The membership will stand as a proof of being there, having caught the train. And the question is in which part of the train will Turkey be travelling and with what.

Yet, the modernisation strategies held in Turkey is related to today and to this work also by the fact that, the fragmented state of being has been marked by rebirth of grand narratives and in this particular case Europe and its aspects of belonging and defining the social sphere. Recently, Lisbon treaty has marked the discussions on European Union. Lisbon treaty is mainly about producing a unified constitution that will be valid in all member countries of Europe and there will be an assigned chairman who will be in charge of the whole structure. This is still in discussion and has recently received a rejection from Ireland. The state of the acceptance is still unclear but if so it will be a redefinition of the unification and togetherness. The effects of the unification will possibly lead to more of a standardisation of living styles and normalisation of rituals and customs of each minority and majority groups. If we define the society in the realms of minority and majority and encapsulate the norms of regulation, following stage will be homogeneous, where the integration of the minority into a normality. I recall Hannah Arendt's definition of the normal man who is someone who can only say two times two is four, repeatedly.

Hence, what has become of Europe today is not what it has resembled in the 80's or in neither the 70's nor 60's. Europe, with its union, tending to have a strong political stance in the world politics is employing norms of hygienisation, normalisation and othering. The policies of standardising the living, controlling the social behaviour and solidifying the borders have been shaping the conditions of being a citizen of a European Country. The economic and social flow is being defined in narrower terms, every day. The other becomes the excluded, the untouched and unrelated. In other words, the other becomes the outsider who shall stay outside. The exclusion of variety and difference increases with the rising of the right-wing governments and nationalist anthems. Europe, a fortress of its own, is being guarded by conservatism and dismissal. The question of investigating participation in such a context: are you one of the among whom we were able to make to become European is not only positioning the notion of nation in a continent-base but also the remarkable aspects of that nation, of that citizenship.

Günyol and Kunt's question investigates the change that has taken place throughout the years of living in Europe, being part of a western civilisation. The 'becoming'*** marks alteration, a differing of what one was and what one has become. The over signified Western civilisation and Europeanness is indicated by its contemporary state and in the eye of the beholder. The people who have been living in Europe, in this case in Germany for almost 50 years and have been experiencing what the people they left behind (in Turkey) are longing for. And what is the real picture? Are you, could you become European? Could that process be managed well and what does it mean? Where does it stand? Where will it lead us? Will there be a 'we' that is based on autonomous participation? Can we not even mention that 'we'? What will the future society be like? Are you/will you become one of them? Could you be managed to become normal? How will that feel? How does it feel now?

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*For instance, Czech Republic is the country with the longest name in Turkish, and is the most regarded longest word with syllables when made into 'are you among the ones who we were able to make to become Czech'.

** Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar has keyed the term 'missed train' in regard to the contemporary conditions of 50's Turkey. Tanpınar was one of the influencing prominent writers in Turkey.

*** The wording of becoming is used in reference to the conceptualisation of Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze becoming is a continuous ontological procedure where the real and the construction of real is in a state of flux, or differentiation. In this perspective I claim that, the Europeanification of Europe is being defined by the continuous introduction of concepts of social aspects in order to perform the desired entity.