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Monolingualising the Multilingual Ottoman Novel: Ahmet Midhat Efendi's *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi*

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In the introduction to his recent book, *What is a World?*,¹ Pheng Cheah argues: 'It should be evident that we should not take the presentation of the world for granted because, it, at the very least, is given to us by imagination'.² His intervention into the debates within the field of world literature draws our attention to a hitherto overlooked aspect of the field: the world. Whether it is by charting circulation, waves within the world-system, or mapping the meridian of the world of letters – to reference the most famous, but certainly not the only models – world literature has relied heavily on 'normative understandings of the world',³ where the world remains a conceptually stable and seemingly objective unit of analysis. As Cheah asserts 'world literature as a world-making activity',⁴ he refocuses our attention on the field of world literature itself, highlighting that it is a critical activity, one which produces and reinforces not only definitions of literature but also of the world.

Cheah, of course, is not the only scholar to draw attention to world literature as world-making. Francesca Orsini, for example, points to the biases and privileges that have not yet been fully accounted for in the revival of world literature at the turn of the 21st century: "World literature," a famously slippery, apparently expansive yet surprisingly narrow category, has been much theorized and re-theorized in recent years as comparative literature for the global age, with one foot in the US university curriculum and the other in theories of globalization'.⁵ Orsini's work takes aim particularly at the monolingual conception of the world in 21st century revival of 'world literature', where it cannot seem to, or does not want to, accommodate the fact that 'literary cultures have indeed been multilingual in most parts of the world since the second millennium'.⁶

Building on the above interventions in world literature, this chapter will consider world literature and multilingualism with regard to the late-Ottoman novel.⁷ Its starting point is to emphasize that multilingualism is the contextual reality, linguistic scaffold and thematic interest of the Ottoman novel, particularly in *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* (1875). It will argue that, for the Ottoman novel, the multilingual ecology of the form may be defined as cosmopolitanism, where, according to Cheah it is 'about viewing oneself as part of the

world,'⁸ even as this connection to the world, as Rebecca Walkowitz has argued, might also be 'a model of perversity, in the senses of obstinacy, indirection, immorality and attitude'.⁹

Despite the novel being indebted to Ottoman multilingualism, this fact has been obfuscated, if not occluded, by the two major lines of critical enquiry that have dominated its reading and reception. First is the secularizing, nationalist, monolingualist criticism emerging from the Turkish Republic. This branch of criticism had two primary (albeit, often unconscious) outcomes: to seek legitimacy and authenticity in literary expression and to demonstrate the success of Republican modernization efforts, such that the Turkish novel would always be superior to its Ottoman origins. Its conclusions often rely on identitarian¹⁰ or nationalist evaluations based upon dichotomies between self/other and East/West, while its evaluative thrust tends to consider the novel as either good or bad. The second is the revival of world literature under which a new home has been found for the international study of Ottoman and Turkish novels. Particularly, Moretti's 'Conjectures on World Literature'¹¹ opened up a critical framework which offered genuine possibilities to recontextualize Ottoman and Turkish literature in broader terms than those offered by national(ist) frames. However, what we will come to see is that even as world literature attempts to identify connections beyond the national paradigm, it, at least in the case of the Ottoman novel, unintentionally reverts to a similar identitarian dichotomy: foreign/local. For this reason, these literary critical frameworks, which have been most interested in the Ottoman and Turkish novel, have not yet managed to recognize its multilingual origins, let alone critically activate them.

The focus on criticism rather than the Ottoman novels themselves in the first part of this chapter is not accidental. My approach can be situated in the wake of Felski's *The Limits of Critique* and the huge inroads the book makes into understanding how criticism functions on texts as its 'dominant metalanguage'.¹² Felski's redeployment of Ricoeur's 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and focus on the 'style and sensibility' of critical storytelling help open up the language of nationalist republican criticism that has dominated and determined the Ottoman novel in very particular ways. While Felski is not addressing multilingualism, per se, her reorientation of reading so that we may emphasize a 'language of addition rather than subtraction, translation rather than separation, connection rather than isolation, composition rather than critique'¹³ inspires new potential for reading the Ottoman novel through its multilingualism. In this vein, we may find a way to relieve ourselves from the suspicion that multilingualism is the unfortunate, unspeakable, accident of the Turkish novel's birth, a failure of its modernity and a stain on its role in building the national language and culture.

Instead, we might speak to multilingualism in this ‘language of addition’ and transform our critical activity on the basis that multilingualism was (and is) the life-giving conditions of the novel’s origins and success.

This chapter will thus consider this occluded aspect of the novel through a reading of Ahmet Midhat Efendi’s canonical, *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi*.¹⁴ It will read the novel using multilingualism as its focal point, showing that there is an important, if more ambiguous, conceptualization of the cosmopolitan that is awakened through multilingualism and which seems to refute, or at least complicate, the dominant reading of the novel as proto-nationalist and identitarian. It will furthermore assert, in line with Cheah and Orsini, that world literature is world-making, and that by pivoting around the axis of multilingualism we learn more about the unacknowledged interests of its body of criticism.

The Ottoman Novel: National and World Literary Criticism

In order to understand how criticism has managed to overlook multilingualism in the Ottoman novel, it is worth starting first with a brief description of its contribution to the landscape and composition of the Ottoman novel. To this end, the fact of multilingualism in the late-Ottoman empire is well-known, and it is of particular interest in the study of Istanbul’s print culture at the end of the nineteenth century. Johann Strauss’s seminal research on readership in Istanbul in the late nineteenth century shows the labyrinth of languages and scripts, organized around ethnic and religious groups, as well as print publications such as periodicals and books which were being exchanged and circulated.¹⁵ Strauss begins his study by showing a transformation taking place during the 19th century. At its beginning, the written languages of Istanbul were predominantly classical: Ottoman Turkish, Persian, Arabic, Greek, Armenian and Hebrew.¹⁶ But as the century progressed, witnessed by significant modernization reforms and a new engagement in nationalism, written language went through significant reform. The ensuing developments of written language at this time were four-fold. Firstly, there was a vernacularization of ‘sacred’ languages, particularly Armenian. Secondly, there was a further separation made between ethnic and classical languages (i.e. Turkish was utilized distinctly from Arabic and Judeo-Spanish from Hebrew). Thirdly, this period saw the beginnings of the nationalization of languages, particularly Bulgarian and, finally, French was introduced as both a written and spoken language.¹⁷

Alongside the burgeoning of new written languages, the Ottoman print culture also had a complex exchange of scripts.¹⁸ The primary scripts were Arabo-Persian; Greek;

Hebrew and with the addition of French, the Roman script. Language itself had a flexible relationship to its script. For example, Turkish was written in multiple scripts such as the Arabo-Persian as well as Armenian and Greek.¹⁹ This exchange of script was partly fuelled by a productive and dynamic enterprise of translation and publication between the reading communities, because the knowledge of multiple languages did not necessarily entail knowledge of multiple scripts.²⁰ Interaction varied from community to community in the 19th century and script was an important meeting-point for cross-community, cross-lingual interaction, while also sometimes demonstrating inequality and inaccessibility across communities and readerships.²¹

As it emerged from this multilingual scene, it is not surprising that the novel should be marked by such linguistic and script mixing. *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi* does not disappoint. The novel not only refers to multiple languages, including Armenian, Circassian, Arabic, Persian, English and French, alongside Ottoman Turkish, but also is mainly written in two: Ottoman-Turkish, interspersed with dialogue and words in French, and in addition, one scene where Persian is used. To capture this, the novel uses the two corresponding scripts: Arabo-Persian and Roman. When dialogue takes place in French, the translation is put in parenthesis next to it. Multilingualism is also a useful trope and serves the narrative's comedic, dramatic and dialogic ambitions, as will be discussed in greater detail towards the end of the chapter.

Yet, multilingualism in *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi* has been almost entirely overlooked. While Midhat's use of Turkish language has indeed been a focus of study – for its hasty, colloquial style which brought the written and spoken versions of the language into contact with each other²² – its narrative and linguistic engagement in this multilingual context has never been fully considered. Such an oversight seems to be designed not by the novel itself but rather by the terms of criticism and the primacy of a certain type of suspicion. As Felski writes, for the critic, '[a] toolkit of methods lies ready to hand to draw out what a text does not know and cannot comprehend. The scalpel of political or historical diagnosis slices into a literary work to expose its omissions and occlusions, its denials and disavowals'.²³ In the case of *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi*, however, the question is not what the text does not know; instead, it is what the text knows but the critic cannot fathom.

The discussions surrounding the 'first' Ottoman-Turkish novel are helpful as a way into investigating this point. This is Yusuf Kamil Paşa's 1862 translation of Fénelon's *Les Aventures de Télémaque*. That the novel arrived into Ottoman-Turkish through translation is not, on its own, a particularly striking or controversial fact. Yet, as the fields of Turkish and

Ottoman literary studies developed through the twentieth century, this mere fact has proved to be a continual challenge. Recently, Azade Seyhan has summed up the situation aptly: ‘Practically every work on Turkish literary history cites the birth of the Turkish novel from translation as an inauspicious beginning, as an almost embarrassing fact that is best left unexamined or glossed over.’²⁴

We might add to Seyhan’s point that when this fact is not ignored, the novel becomes an unpayable ‘debt’,²⁵ to which all innovation and development of the novel must neatly be brought back. And as a result, interwoven within literary criticism of the Ottoman and Turkish novel, is a perpetual anxiety about its foreign form. For example, Ahmet Evin has argued that the introduction of the novel to the Ottoman intelligentsia ‘played an important role in the development of modern Turkish literature by becoming a topic of dispute between progressives and traditionalists’.²⁶ Robert Finn takes a more progressive approach but nonetheless sees the Turkish novel as influenced by translations: ‘The first novels published in Turkish were translations from the French. [...]. With the publication of Şemsettin Sami’s *Taaşuk-i Talât ve Fitnat* (The Romance of Talat and Fitnat) in 1872, Ottoman writers began their endeavors in this field. The early novels in Turkish, although modelled on French examples [...], nevertheless include[d] certain elements, both in form and development which have as their antecedents the Near Eastern Story-telling tradition and the rich intellectuality of classical Ottoman poetry, the Divan tradition’.²⁷ Most influentially, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, often considered the first Turkish literary critic, in 1936 eternalised the anxiety of the borrowed novel: ‘*Bir Türk romanı niçin yoktur?*’²⁸ (Why isn’t there a Turkish novel?). His question continues to reverberate in criticism, which Nurdan Gürbilek recently labelled the criticism of ‘lack’: ‘The criticism of lack is torn between two extremes. The first one assumes the original is elsewhere (‘outside’ namely in the West) while the second insists that we do have an authentic literature and a genuine native thought but in order to appreciate it we have to leave aside all those lifeless imitations and snobbish efforts related with the West’.²⁹ The fact of the novel’s translated origins has entrenched in criticism a seemingly immutable anxiety about the ‘lack’ of native identity, culture and expression, while also forcing its gaze towards identitarian politics in East versus West terms.

Suspicion-fuelled criticism has had two major outcomes for the reading of the Ottoman novel. Firstly, critics have derided the novel.³⁰ Secondly, reading the novel has tended to confirm the *a priori* of the critical act itself: namely, that the primary labour of the novel is to address and possibly resolve the ambivalences around identity and culture, embedded in the novel’s original westward gaze.³¹ For example, Mardin writes, ‘the central

theme of *Felâatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* is the difference between two types of westernization'.³² Of course, westernization is thematized and embodied in *Felâatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi*'s characters, but seeing it as the central theme provides a tautology where the ambivalence surrounding the origins of the novel must necessarily be its main theme. All of this is not to suggest that critical inquiries into the evaluation of the Ottoman novel are inadequate, but rather they have been determined by a 'certain orientation', that the act of 'digging down' is one conditioned by the problem of foreignness and authenticity as it encounters ideologically-driven national monolingualism.³³

The other side of the story lies in the twenty-first century revival of world literature. Here, the Ottoman and Turkish novel has been largely ignored as a genre, with the singular exception of Orhan Pamuk who has received a lot of individual attention. Most famously, the genre has been discussed in Moretti's 'Conjectures on World Literature'. In the article, he footnotes two scholars of the Ottoman Turkish novel, Evin and Parla, to support his argument about the 'rule' of the world novel: 'it's *always* as a compromise between foreign form and local materials'.³⁴ As it is explained above, Moretti's 'conjecture' fits neatly with Ottoman-Turkish criticism's own perspective on the development of the novel, while removing the anxieties of authenticity that have dominated local criticism, because it is the 'rule'. As Ertürk cautiously argues, Moretti's compromise allows for 'dynamism and violence, rather than some Orientalized evolutionary plateau of "backwardness"'.³⁵ Of course, 'Conjectures' has received a certain amount of criticism as well. Joseph Slaughter has shown that Moretti's 'rule' is determined by the criticism upon which he builds, that 'reflect[s] the condition and history of comparison from the periphery'.³⁶ In other words, the rule of compromise fits so well in the Ottoman-Turkish context not accidentally, but rather because it is founded in Ottoman-Turkish scholarship which has always argued such a point.

It is not the point of this chapter to rehash arguments for or against Moretti's 'Conjectures'. Instead, it is brought up here to illustrate the minute space – quite literally in the footnotes – which the Ottoman and Turkish novel has been given in discussions of world literature. On the one hand, Moretti does allow for a refocusing of the reading of the conditions of the novel in the late Ottoman Empire—mobilizing those troublesome notions of importation, imitation and debt—to make way for formal uniqueness, originality and therefore, authenticity. On the other hand, the 'act of hospitality'³⁷ in bringing the Ottoman novel to this world stage, as Rey Chow argues, is another 'level of complication: that of the hierarchical frameworks of comparison – and judgement – that have long been present as universals, that tend to subsume otherness rather than deconstruct their processes of operation from within'.³⁸

These two lines of critical enquiry – the dedicated Ottoman-Turkish one and the larger world literary one – are both ultimately dogged by a search for authenticity and the politics of comparison, leaving little space for the multilingualism of the Ottoman novel to be considered on its own terms.

Finally, it is worth pointing out here, with regards to Moretti, that the compromise of form and content determines what is understood about the imaginative possibilities of individual novels themselves.³⁹ We might make an assumption about Moretti's compromise: since the form is foreign but the content is local, the world the novel conjures is likewise *always* local and never worldly.⁴⁰ Such limitations on the non-Western novel's imaginary are clearly different from the wanderings of the colonial travelogue, for example, and its more contemporary novel iterations that serve as authoritative guides to unexplored lands. It is a strange paradox, then, in Moretti's notion of the world novel, that it is recognized to travel the world and yet, at least for the non-Western novel, it cannot imagine it. In the end, Ottoman-Turkish criticism leaves little space to read the novel outside of a foreign/local dichotomy and Moretti's 'Conjectures' never quite manages to relieve it of the suspicion of its inauthenticity, its borrowed-ness, and its limits.

Back to the Beginning: Multilingualism and the Ottoman Novel

The cul-de-sac of suspicion and the reiteration of a foreign/local dichotomy are nevertheless not necessarily unresolvable. Ertürk sums up her discussion of Moretti by pointing to another limitation of his theory: namely, 'the real and unavoidable complexities of linguistic mediation'.⁴¹ For her, a necessary pivot for understanding the rise of the Ottoman novel is in a turn towards language in the late nineteenth century: namely, the development from logocentric language to the rise of phonocentric vernacular.⁴² Ertürk's turn is particularly useful for considering multilingualism in the Ottoman novel. She writes: 'conventional critical models of literary influence, which turn on the dissemination of European genres such as the novel or European literary currents such as realism, Romanticism, and modernism, are incapable of explaining the emergence of new Ottoman Turkish literary forms, which are *foremost* contingent on the transformation of writing practices accompanying their development'.⁴³ In a similar vein, this chapter too sees the multilingual as a fulcrum by which criticism might be shifted away from the suspicion of inauthenticity.

To this end, it is worth revisiting the *Télémaque* translation through the prism of multilingualism. If on the one hand, its importation and translation from the French has been dominated by identitarian-oriented criticism, on the other, Strauss's study considers the

translation in a rather different way. His focus is on the multiple local print cultures and leads him to conclude that this translation as the first novel is ‘less striking a choice if we consider the fact that it has been immensely popular among all communities in the Levant before’.⁴⁴ Arzu Meral’s study of *Télémaque* in the Ottoman empire likewise highlights that the ‘Turks’ acquaintance with the novel predates its translation into Ottoman-Turkish, not only through the French original, but also because the Greek and Arabic translations were popular and well-known in the Empire.⁴⁵ Strauss and Meral’s detailed literary histories emphasize that while East-West exchange was indeed part of the story, the exchange between various language and reading communities within Istanbul and the Ottoman Empire was far more significant for the conditions of what and when the first Ottoman novel would be.

The significance of this for the reading of the Ottoman novel is likewise important as it suggests that dominant readings which have privileged the thematization of West-East identities, as well as ones that favour the question of identity, do so outside of the immediate and contemporary context of the readership and language of the Ottoman novel. Of course, large parts of the early novel are indeed dedicated to these themes. However, the fact of multilingualism provides a platform to see greater interests and appeal of the novel, which have been almost completely circumvented for the sake of East-West identitarianism and Westernization.⁴⁶

(Re)reading *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* through multilingualism

Ahmet Midhat’s *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* is primarily discussed in three ways: first, in terms of Ahmet Midhat’s contribution to the proliferation of the Ottoman novel; second, in the context of his work as a late-19th century reformer; thirdly, for his work as a translator of European literature. At the same time, Jale Parla points out that Midhat was only recognized for his contribution to the development of the Turkish novel in the 1970s, and since then, has been seen as a key figure for anchoring the Turkish novel within local language and culture, as opposed to centring its foreign influence.⁴⁷ Among other points, this is what makes *Felatun Bey* such an interesting point of discussion. On the one hand, it is seen as an example of the domesticated novel, whose impact is felt throughout the generations which come after it,⁴⁸ and, on the other hand, its themes and plot – the content of its story – are widely regarded as measuring the effects of foreign influence and cautioning against its excesses. In this sense, *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* is seen in almost conflicting ways – as part of the initiative that domesticated the novel form and as one that warned against cultural and social westernization.

The story of *Felâton Bey ile Râkım Efendi* follows the lives of the two eponymous characters, Felâton and Râkım. Most of the narrative is given to describing random conversations, the coincidences and encounters between friends and family around famous Istanbul locations (i.e. the contingencies of unexceptional daily life), but if there is one overarching narrative, it is the love story between his slave, Canan, and Râkım. Ahmet Evin, however, has argued more broadly: ‘The main plot of the novel revolves around Râkım’s spectacular success as an intellectual entrepreneur paralleled by his popularity with women’.⁴⁹ Either way, narrative focus is primarily given to Râkım who is torn between his duty as educator and guardian of Canan and his burgeoning love interest in her. Although there are no catastrophic obstacles, at least in the sense that Canan and Râkım stay emotionally true to each other, Râkım’s attractiveness creates some jealousy and despair, not least with Felâton.

Unsatisfied with the vague plot, which is ‘conceived more as a story told in an informal circle than as a novel’,⁵⁰ and suspicious of the narrative style, scholarship has tended to emphasize a particular reading of *Felâton Bey ile Râkım Efendi*, which centres its characters. Evin continues: ‘The two principal characters, Felâton and Râkım, are creatures of a difference universe thrown together between the two covers of a book for the purpose of a parable; they only meet coincidentally in the Ziglas house. Characterization is achieved by means of hyperbole [...]’.⁵¹ In this way, Felâton and Râkım provide useful signposting and significance for a novel ‘thrown together’ in a haphazard composition. They serve as anchors for critical inquiry, which compares their characteristics and the trajectories of their lives, through East-West identitarian anxieties. Mardin sums up the comparison in a similar vein: ‘Thus the central theme of *Felâton Bey ile Râkım Efendi* is the difference between two types Westernization, one approved by the author, the other selected for ridicule’.⁵² Berna Moran argues that the comparison between Felâton and Râkım amounts to a comparison between the over-westernized dandy and ideal Ottoman man.⁵³ Evin sees a different emphasis, however: ‘The problem with Felâton is not that he is Westernized, but that he has fundamentally misunderstood what the West means’.⁵⁴ As for Râkım, he ‘is more of a Westernized type in that he has the intellectual curiosity and the work ethic of the European bourgeois’.⁵⁵ While these approaches consider the meaning of the novel in overlapping but slightly different ways, they rely on a similar critical position: namely, that there is a didactic thrust of the novel which provides its readers with stable and singular knowledge about Ottoman society and the West.⁵⁶ This arises from the juxtaposition of the two characters, despite the anxiety over Ahmet Midhat’s skill as a novelist.⁵⁷ In other words, the story is a cautionary tale: one

that champions one way of living over the excesses of another, while also reiterating the seemingly irreconcilable difference between East and West.

This idea, that *Felâton Bey ile Râkım Efendi* delivers a stable ‘moral,’⁵⁸ is intensified by another much-discussed feature of Ahmet Midhat’s writing style: namely, his pronounced, playful and involved narrators. For Parla, it is not so much the narrator but the authorial voice which interrupts his narratives: ‘In an almost frenzied effort to ensure the undivided attention of his readers, Ahmet Mithat interrupts his narrative to inform them on a topic he thinks significant, to moralize, to discuss his novelistic concerns and problems, or to offer autobiographical details’.⁵⁹ Seen as descendent from the *meddah* tradition [coffee-house, story-tellers], Midhat’s author/narrator is one of the most prominent features of *Felâton Bey ile Râkım Efendi* as well. In Ertürk’s discussion of Midhat’s ‘*meddah*-author’ she makes the further argument that the involved and interrupting author persona gives his ‘ear to the world’, distributing the rumours and events that are encountered in the landscape of daily lives.⁶⁰ For Ertürk, then, the *meddah* tradition shapes the role of the narrator who primes the reader, engages and holds their interest.

It might then be argued that the story’s moral is rather less the focus of the novel than its interest in exploring storytelling, for the sake of storytelling. Take, for example, the opening lines of *Felâton Bey ile Râkım Efendi*: ‘Have you heard of Felâton Bey? You know who I’m talking about, old Mustafa Meraki Efendi’s son! Doesn’t ring a bell? Well now, he’s a lad worth meeting’.⁶¹ And again, when the narrator introduces Râkım in the beginning of Chapter 2: ‘The previous section informed us pretty well about the specific personality of one of the two individuals we named our story after. Now, here briefly once again we need to take a look at Râkım Efendi’s situation’.⁶² Such a pronounced narrative voice serves the purpose of not only introducing the characters, but conditioning the reader to the assertive, interactive and, above all, light-hearted and teasing voice of the narrator. Here, it is the salaciousness of story-telling that is being asserted, more than a strictly informed morality.⁶³

This is not to say that morality does not play a part in storytelling, but that the dialogue between narrator and reader is often at the forefront of novel’s attention. Take this moment when the narrator is describing Felâton and Râkım’s last encounter, after Felâton has wasted away all his money and has been compelled to take up a job outside of Istanbul:

[...Râkım] went all the way down to Hendekbaşı.

Who do you suppose he ran across there?

Felâton Bey!

Oh, no, put the waster aside!

How can we? How can we abandon the fellow who is a partner to half our story?

We should never have included him in this story in the first place.

We shouldn't have...but we already did. Besides, where is this animosity towards Felâton Bey coming from? Is it that you can't stand his *alafranga* ways? If Felâton Bey didn't exist, how could the mayonnaise incident have occurred? What about the Hotel J-----? Would it be able to host such a rich *alafranga* Ottoman if not for Felâton Bey? Would the two bands have played in front of the lady's carriage in Kağıthane?

What good is it if he's going to rack and ruin?

It's all right! We assure you that he is not going to go rack and ruin anymore.

He can't anyway!

We fear that his money...

Instead of worrying, listen to this:⁶⁴

This narrative break in the plot is a conversation, imagined by the narrator as between himself and the reader(s). It certainly can be seen as moralizing, insofar as it is asking about whether 'we' should have included Felatun in the story. Yet, and moreover, by its very words, it questions this morality. It poses questions; it tells us, the readers, to reserve judgement. And above all else, it tells us that a good story – Felatun's mayonnaise, the hotel, the two bands— is more important than a morally unimpinged world. Moreover, the novel is also mimicking – here, mimicking as slippage and excess⁶⁵ – the technique of dialogism which, to borrow Ertürk's phrase, has the effect of setting words free, as it was 'both enchanted by *and* fearful of open communicability and translatability in Ottoman Turkish'.⁶⁶

The two major points of critical engagement – authorial/narrator's voice and the obvious juxtaposition between the two main characters – have typically been seen to confirm a moralistic and proto-nationalist, identitarian worldview or the novel and novelist. Such a perspective confirms the suspicions that the Ottoman novel is neither a 'good' novel nor is its society quite 'ready' for it. However, considering the *meddah*/author/narrator as 'mimicking the moralizing voice of [an] older mode of authority',⁶⁷ is a useful clarification to these identitarian and nationalist criticisms of hindsight, because it opens up the ways in which we might also read Rakım and Felatun. Instead of thinking of their stories as straightforwardly educative, we might think of excess, not only in Felatun's overwesternized ways, but also in

how the excesses of language and dialogue construct society and interpersonal relations that quite literally caution the reader against digging past the story to get to a moral.

This is where multilingualism re-emerges in the discussion of the Ottoman novel and its criticism. As I have already mentioned, from Ertürk's discussion of Midhat, we see that the novel was a 'kind of public overhearing of the gossip, rumor and news of a language disseminated in oral and written media'.⁶⁸ As we have already established through Strauss's work, 'oral and written media' were multilingual and multi-scripted. It is thus not surprising that *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi* is both thematically and prosaically multilingual. This multilingual composition is employed in primarily three ways: comic relief; communication and knowledge-building; and dialogue. It is worth mentioning that as Ertürk shows, multilingualism should not be read in the late Ottoman empire as utopic heterogeneity. Instead, she sees modern identitarian movements emerging from this heterogeneity with Midhat himself aligned with 'imperial Ottoman identity in promoting the hegemony of Turkish-Islamic values'.⁶⁹ This is to add that the question of multilingualism is not, in the Ottoman context, one inherently poised against national and monolingual criticism of twentieth-century Turkey. In fact, its ambivalence is precisely the point for thinking about the novel outside of the hermeneutics of suspicion, for it, like the *meddah*/narrator is part of a 'network of actors that bring new things to light'.⁷⁰ Finally, that it has been almost wholly overlooked in the canonical novel and readings of *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi* speaks to the ways in which it fits uncomfortably with criticism which sought to draw a singular line of development to the Turkish novel, nationalism and the era of monolingualism.

Thus, multilingualism is a fact of *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi*, reflective of a stratified society and entwined with Midhat's experimentations with the novel. To give one example of how it appears, in the second chapter which introduces Rakım, his education is described:

[H]e thoroughly learned the fourth annotated Arabic textbook. He was especially well trained in logic. He acquired a substantial knowledge of Hadith and Quranic exegesis. He even dipped into Islamic jurisprudence. Quite apart from finishing the Persian works of Saadi's *Gulistan* and *Bustan*, Jami's *Baharistan*, Attar's *Pandnameh*, and the poetry of Hafez and Saib, he memorized the most famous selections of these works. Now, about French: he achieved a good grasp of the language. Later [...] he mastered the basics of physics, chemistry, and biology; in his Armenian friend's library in Beyoğlu he accumulated additional knowledge of geography, history, law and

international agreements. He never stopped reading French novels, plays, poems, and literature.⁷¹

What is immediately striking is how knowledge and language are tied together. Arabic, Farsi, French and Ottoman Turkish are not merely languages, but connected to epistemologies. In this passage, Parla points to a divide between positivist sciences in the French-Armenian language-sphere and Islamic sciences in the Arabo-Persian one.⁷² Her analysis supports a metonymic relationship between language and knowledge, where French, Arabic and Persian stand in for positivist science, Islamic logic, and poetics, respectively. This is not accidental, as *Felâtnun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* follows a common perspective on what different languages/knowledges might have contributed to the Ottoman Empire. Taken further, modern identitarianist formations reinforce this analysis, particularly in an assertion of different types of knowledge clashing, between Islamic ontology and morality, on the one hand, and Western science and governance on the other.

At the same time, the focus of multilingualism might also give us new ways of reading this description. Instead of metonymic, language can be read as *synecdochical*, representing part of (the whole world of) knowledge. In this passage – but indeed throughout the various language exchanges in the novel – the depiction of languages and knowledges is as syncretic, rather than clashing, even when there is no clear distinction between types of knowledges and its designated languages: French represents literature as much as Persian and both Arabic and French represent law and logic. The lack of competition suggests that there is no real *clash* between knowledges in *Felâtnun Bey ile Rakım Efendi*. In other words, each language brings something (i.e. a specific type of knowledge) and together they represent a concept of the world. This is a world forged in multiple languages, not in contest with each other, but in play.

Clearly, reading the multilingual in such a way echoes cosmopolitanism in its ability to imagine ‘the whole of deterritorialized humanity’.⁷³ Yet, neither the novel nor cosmopolitanism necessarily have to do this imagining in utopic terms, as is often supposed. As Walkowitz writes in relation to her idea of critical cosmopolitanism: ‘I argue that the syncretic but less-than-national tradition of cosmopolitanism, which is often associated with aestheticism, dandyism, and *flânerie* at the fin de siècle, helped to establish a new analysis of perception and alternative tones of political consciousness amount early modernist writers’.⁷⁴ These texts unfold with ‘aesthetic decadence, a repertoire of excessively and purposefully deviant cultural strategies which include pleasure, consumption, syncretism and perversity’.⁷⁵

Although she addresses European literature in particular, Walkowitz might as well be speaking directly to *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi*. Her insistence that syncretism comes with (not despite) aesthetic decadence, political consciousness and excess speaks largely to a recent rethinking of cosmopolitanism that goes beyond the ‘abstract universal normative view of the ideal unity of the world’.⁷⁶

While Rakım is a master of both multiple knowledges/languages and communication, Felatun is ridiculed for not knowing Turkish properly and only speaking in French.⁷⁷ In one scene, for example, he forgets that Ottoman has the letters ‘p’, ‘ç’, and ‘z’ in addition to the letters from the Arabic alphabet⁷⁸, the narrator describes this oversight in knowledge as such:

It seems that when Felatun Bey had seen these letters at first he had thought that they did not exist in the old alphabet, so in order to sound ‘like Plato’ to the English he supposedly lampooned and ridiculed quite a bit the teacher, whom he didn’t even know, by putting forth the ideas that the girls would not learn any Turkish if they studied with such a man; and that this man who they found as a teacher didn’t know Turkish anyway.⁷⁹

As a counterexample to Rakım’s supremacy in knowledges/languages, we can see how Felatun is targeted as small-minded, petty and spiteful, and this is instrumentally unfolded around his lack of languages/knowledges. This scene represents, from Felatun’s ‘failure’, what happens when knowledges are in competition. Here, there are two indictments against Felatun: the mimicking of ‘Plato’ and his confusion between the Arabic and Turkish alphabets. This, indeed, can be read as both over-westernization and a kind of self-loathing. However, it is not without importance that his failures arise because he is located in *one* language and his horizon is therefore blocked. If we may conclude something from the narrator’s mockery of Felatun in this scene, it is that the monolingual man cannot understand and does not know, and that the excesses of dandyism here are less that he speaks French and more that he is *only* monolingual.

This reading of *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* shifts the novel away from the hitherto emphasized discussion of East and West and towards one that highlights the novel as an affirming envisioning of the syncretic – but not necessarily utopic – ways in which language, knowledge and communication are performed. Rakım is an idealized character but together with Felatun, the contemporary world imagined is neither ideal or demonic, East or West, Ottoman or French, translated or original.

It is hard in the Ottoman-Turkish context, and perhaps in the Middle East more generally, not to go back and read a ‘clash’ of civilizations into its turn-of-the-century literature. Yet, the Ottoman novel rarely imagines the world in such simplistic terms; it sees humour, danger, excess and fun in its multiple knowledges and languages. The multiplicity of languages can equally construct harmony as well as confusion, arrogance and small-mindedness. If suspicion has always led us to read the Ottoman novel as caught in the crisis of an Empire’s downfall, deluged with unwanted westernization and suffering from a breakdown of its own cultural and identitarian-based authenticity, then *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi*’s multilingualism casts the terms of these themes differently. Instead of crisis, deluge and breakdown, the novel imagines a world forged of multiple languages, which some of its citizens navigate and some do not manage. On this final point, it might be said that the crisis of identity in the Ottoman novel belongs not to *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi* but to criticism itself; and that the syncretic system that makes up the novel and its characters imprints it, not as half-foreign, borrowed, or translated, but as a negotiation between the many languages and knowledges that makes up its world.

¹ Pheng Cheah, *What is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (London: Duke University Press, 2016).

² Ibid, 2.

³ Ibid, 2.

⁴ Ibid, 2.

⁵ Francesca Orsini, ‘The Multilingual Local in World Literature’, *Comparative Literature* 67, no. 4 (2015): 345-374, 345.

⁶ Orsini, ‘The Multilingual Local in World Literature’, 346.

⁷ The designation here of ‘Ottoman’ is made to situate these novels, and in particular *Felâhî Bey ile Rakım Efendi*, in a particular linguistic and literary moment. As Nergis Ertürk states, its historical period is defined from its past by ‘the lexical and grammatical simplifications of Ottoman Turkish, during the nineteenth century’ and precede ‘the extensive language reforms of the twentieth, which saw the new Turkish Republic undertaking to thoroughly rationalize modern Turkish, overcoming the gap separating its spoken from its written registers.’ Nergis Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), x.

⁸ Cheah, *What is a World?*, 3.

⁹ Rebecca Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 13.

¹⁰ I am borrowing this term from Nergis Ertürk, who, in turn, builds on Derrida. Like Ertürk, I mean ‘nativist politics’. Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey* 44 fn 41.

¹¹ Franco Moretti, (2000), ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54-68.

¹² Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 5.

¹³ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 182.

¹⁴ This chapter relies on the recent English translation of the novel for its quotations, because the English translation is particularly invested in highlighting the multilingual and multi-script composition of the novel. In the two Turkish translations/transliterations consulted, there has been more of an effort to consolidate the text into standard Turkish. In one case, the French dialogue was replaced with Turkish and, in another, examples of specific authors and texts in Persian literature were edited out. This itself speaks to an interesting language politics that is carried out in transliteration and should be further studied, while also confirming the larger point

about nationalist monolingual criticism that this chapter is making. Ahmet Midhat, *Felatun Bey and Rakım Efendi* trans. Melih Levi and Monica M Ringer (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2016). Ahmet Midhat, *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* eds. Rukiye Şahin. (İstanbul: LM Leyla ile Mecnun Yayıncılık, 2018) and Ahmet Midhat, *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* ed Tacettin Şimşek (Ankara: Akçağ Yayınları, 1998).

¹⁵ Johann Strauss, ‘Who Reads What in the Ottoman Empire (19th-20th Centuries)?’, *Middle Eastern Literatures*, 6, no. 1 (2010): 39-76.

¹⁶ Strauss, ‘Who Reads What’, 40.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 42.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 53.

¹⁹ Benjamin Fortna, *Learning to Read in the Late Ottoman Empire and the Early Turkish Republic*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 10-11.

²⁰ Strauss, ‘Who Reads What’, 54.

²¹ For example, Strauss explains that Greek and Armenian communities read Turkish works, like *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* but Armenian and Karamanlı writing did not have equal appeal in the Turkish readership community. Strauss, ‘Who Reads What’, 53.

²² Ahmet Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1983), 82.

²³ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 16.

²⁴ Azade Seyhan, *Tales of Crossed Destinies: The Modern Turkish Novel in a Comparative Context* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 2008), 31.

²⁵ Jale Parla writes: ‘The presence of “foreign interference” has an alienating effect upon working on their native literature. Local specialists, if they are educated within the native philological tradition [...] are embarrassed by and, therefore, tend to dismiss as insignificant all kinds of discrepancies, tensions, and contradictions that they diagnose to be the outcome of foreign interference, or “foreign debt”...’ Jale Parla, ‘The Object of Comparison’ *Comparative Literature Studies* 41, no. 1 (2004): 116-125, 124.

²⁶ Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel*, 43.

²⁷ Robert Finn, *The Early Turkish Novel 1872-1900* (İstanbul: İsis Yayıncılık LTD, 1984), 1.

²⁸ Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, ‘Bizde Roman’ *Edebiyat Üzerine Makaleler* (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1998): 46-47, 46.

²⁹ Nurdan Gurbilek, ‘Dandies and Originals: Authenticity, Belatedness and the Turkish Novel’ *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102: 2/3 (2003): 599-624, 600.

³⁰ For sure, this minimization of the Ottoman novel and early efforts in the genre is somewhat out-of-fashion. For example, Finn writes in his conclusion, ‘That such a remarkable development [of the Turkish novel] could have been made in the span of one generation is mainly a function of the imitative nature of the Turkish novel in this period. In addition, the development was neither chronologically nor developmentally adherent to that of the French novel, but, as might be expected, haphazard and arbitrary.’ Finn, *The Early Turkish Novel*, 1.

³¹ Felski calls this the ‘tireless tautology, rediscovering the truth of its bleak prognoses over and over again’. Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 35.

³² Şerif Mardin, ‘Superwesternization in Urban Life in the Ottoman Empire in the last quarter of the 19th Century’ *Turkey: Geographical and Social Perspectives* ed. P Benedict and E. Tümertekin (Leiden: Brill, 1974): 403-443, 406.

³³ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 115.

³⁴ Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, 60 and 62.

³⁵ Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, 20.

³⁶ Joseph Slaughter, ‘Locations of Comparison’ *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5, no. 2 (2018): 209-226, 221.

³⁷ Slaughter, ‘Locations of Comparison’, 221.

³⁸ Rey Chow, ‘The Old/New Question of Comparison in Literary Studies: A Post-European Perspective’ *ELH* 71.2 (2004): 289-311, 304.

³⁹ Moretti’s interests lie in ‘distant reading’ and it is clear why he does not emphasize the individual novel. Yet, when we come back to national literatures, on which he is building his argument, we also inevitably return to the individual novel.

⁴⁰ To borrow Moretti’s emphasis on the ‘always’ of the law of compromise. Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, 60.

⁴¹ Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, 20.

⁴² *Ibid*, 13.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 13. Author’s italics.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 49.

⁴⁵ Arzu Meral, ‘The Ottoman Reception of Fénelon’s *Télémaque*’ *Fénelon’s Enlightenment: Traditions, Adaptations and Variations*, ed. Cristoph Schmitt-Maaß, Stephanie Stockhorst and Doohwan Ahn, (Online: Brill/Rodopi, 2014): 211-235, 211. Date accessed August 8, 2019.

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- ⁴⁶ The seminal criticism of Berna Moran is a good example of this. While he rightly points to how the Ottoman novel had a problem of Westernization that needed to be addressed, in order for the novel to be relevant, he overlooks the larger more diverse linguistic universe from which these novels were emerging. For example, Moran argues that *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi*'s influence as an early novel can be attributed to two points: its characterization of Westernization through the dandy figure and its view of Westernization as excess. Both points, while of course important contributions to the discussion of the Ottoman novel, reiterate Westernization as the most significance aspect of the novel's context. Berna Moran, *Türk Romanına Eleştirel bir Bakış* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1983), 48.
- ⁴⁷ Parla, 'The Object of Comparison', 123.
- ⁴⁸ Moran, *Türk Romanına Eleştirel bir Bakış*, 48.
- ⁴⁹ Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel*, 84.
- ⁵⁰ Ibid, 81.
- ⁵¹ Ibid, 85.
- ⁵² Mardin, 'Superwesternization in Urban Life in the Ottoman Empire in the last quarter of the 19th Century', 406.
- ⁵³ Moran, *Türk Romanına Eleştirel bir Bakış*, 48-49.
- ⁵⁴ Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel*, 87.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid, 87.
- ⁵⁶ What Evin calls a 'parable', Moran calls a 'fable'. Moran, *Türk Romanına Eleştirel bir Bakış*, 58. Both give the sense that two characters' juxtaposition brings about a singular message and educative experience from reading the novel.
- ⁵⁷ Evin, for example, says: '[The] banal and surprisingly colloquial opening is indicative of Ahmet Mithat's approach to the novel [...].It has often been pointed out that the uneven nature of his prose resulted from his preference for speed over accuracy in composing his articles as well as his fiction.' Evin, *Origins and Development of the Turkish Novel*, 82.
- ⁵⁸ Parla, 'The Object of Comparison', 122.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid, 121.
- ⁶⁰ Ertürk, *Grammarology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, 13 and 46-47.
- ⁶¹ Midhat, *Felatun Bey and Rakım Efendi*, 1.
- ⁶² Ibid, 9.
- ⁶³ We are not introduced to the characters as 'good' and 'bad', for example.
- ⁶⁴ Midhat, *Felatun Bey and Rakım Efendi*, 126-127.
- ⁶⁵ Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse' *October*, 28 (1984): 125-133, 126.
- ⁶⁶ Ertürk uses this phrase specifically for the 'initial phase of phonocentrist venacularization' of which Midhat was a huge contributor. Ertürk, *Grammarology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*, 13.
- ⁶⁷ Ibid, 58.
- ⁶⁸ Ibid, 33.
- ⁶⁹ Ibid, 44, fn 42.
- ⁷⁰ Felski, *The Limits of Critique*, 174.
- ⁷¹ Midhat, *Felatun Bey and Rakım Efendi*, 10-11.
- ⁷² Jale Parla, *Babalar ve Oğullar: Tanzimat Romanının Epistemolojik Temelleri*. (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1990), 32.
- ⁷³ Cheah, *What is a World?*, 3.
- ⁷⁴ Walkowitz, *Cosmopolitan Style*, 13.
- ⁷⁵ Ibid
- ⁷⁶ Cheah, *What is a World?*, 3.
- ⁷⁷ Cheah, *What is a World?*, 6.
- ⁷⁸ Midhat *Felatun Bey and Rakım Efendi*, 31.
- ⁷⁹ Ibid, 31-32.