

M. Hakan Yavuz. *Nostalgia for the Empire. The Politics of Neo-Ottomanism*. New York: Oxford University Press. 2020. xviii + 318 pages. ISBN-13: 9780197512289

Reviewed by **Johanna Chovanec¹**

Universität Wien, Österreich

johanna.chovanec@univie.ac.at

Scholarly interest in empires and their legacies has been expanding across disciplines, a development described as the ‘post-imperial turn’ in social sciences and humanities. Besides contributions from political science, sociology and history, cultural and literary studies analyse the multi-faceted after-effects of imperial decline that are captured in ‘post-imperial literatures’. Against the backdrop of what has been labelled as neo-Ottomanism in Turkish politics, the academic curiosity about the Ottoman Empire has been particularly prominent.² Scholars have responded to the extensive literary engagement with Turkey’s imperial heritage through concepts such as ‘End-of-Empire Melancholy’, ‘Ottoman Utopia’ or the ‘Ottoman Myth’.³

M. Hakan Yavuz, who has been shaping the scholarly debate on neo-Ottomanism since its beginnings, has now provided us with an important and engaging book: *Nostalgia for the Empire* weaves together the different ‘sites’ of Ottoman nostalgia, from its political articulations to literary discourses. Further expanding on the “*Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism*”⁴, Yavuz’ study is the first that comprehensively explores the strong correlations – and sometimes interdependencies – between literary and political dimensions of post-imperial nostalgia. His long *durée* approach convincingly

1 This review discusses the literary aspects of M. Hakan Yavuz’ monograph and hence primarily focuses on its third chapter ‘Sites of Ottoman Memory: Literature and Sufi Orders’. A short and revised version of the review appeared in *Middle East Critique*, vol. 30, no. 2 (Summer 2021).

2 See Mikhail, Alan and Philliou, Christine M. 2012. ‘The Ottoman Empire and the Imperial Turn’. *Comparative Studies in Society and History*. 54.4. 721-745.

3 See respectively Konuk, Kader. 2011. ‘Istanbul on Fire: End-of-Empire Melancholy in Orhan Pamuk’s Istanbul’. *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*. 86.4. 249-261; Furlanetto, Elena. 2015. “Imagine a Country Where We Are All Equal”: Imperial Nostalgia in Turkey and Elif Shafak’s Ottoman Utopia’. In Buchenau, Barbara; Richter, Virginia and Denger, Marijke (eds.). *Post-Empire Imaginaries?: Anglophone Literature, History, and the Demise of Empires*. Leiden: Brill Rodopi. 159-180 and Chovanec, Johanna. 2021. ‘The Ottoman Myth in Turkish Literature’. In Chovanec, Johanna and Heilo, Olof (eds.). *Narrated Empires: Perception of late Habsburg and Ottoman Multinationalism*. Series: Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe. Cham: Palgrave.

4 Yavuz, M. Hakan. 1998. ‘Turkish Identity and Foreign Policy in Flux: The Rise of Neo-Ottomanism’. *Critique*. 7.12. 19-41 and Yavuz, M. Hakan. 2016. ‘Social and Intellectual Origins of Neo-Ottomanism: Searching for a Post-National Vision’. *Die Welt des Islams*. 56.3-4. 438-465.

shows that, in contrast to how it may appear to outside observes, retrospection to lost imperial glory is not only a recent political phenomenon in Turkey but has been evolving in many spheres of society since the collapse of empire. As this study demonstrates, it was early republican literature that paved the way for the Ottoman Empire to powerfully return to public discourses long before the imperial past became *en vogue* politically. Yavuz identifies Turkish literature as a “*major battleground*” (p. 68) where crucial questions of belonging, remembrance and ideology have been debated and disseminated. As such, literature can be considered a key vehicle for the aestheticization and/or politicisation of empire, often dependent on authors’ political affinities. Against this backdrop, Yavuz devotes the third chapter of his book to the literary “*Sites of Ottoman Memory*”, building on “*The Social Origins of Nostalgia for Ottomanism*” explored in chapter two.

In his analysis of “*literary neo-Ottomanism*”, Yavuz differentiates three groups of writers and thinkers. The first includes authors such as Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar and Orhan Pamuk who favour a synthesis between past and present by engaging with the social and cultural ramifications of the radical transformation from empire to nation-state. As one of Turkey’s most renowned authors, Tanpinar aestheticized certain aspects of the Ottoman Empire to promote its heritage as an integral part of Turkish identity. Yavuz emphasises that Tanpinar’s protagonists seek refuge in the past through Ottoman music and poetry (p. 75), which is particularly true for the novels’ male characters. To what extent post-imperial nostalgia can be qualified as a predominantly male narrative could be a topic of further inquiry into neo-Ottoman literary patterns: Similar to Orhan Pamuk’s melancholic Kemal (*The Museum of Innocence*), Tanpinar’s Mümtaz (*A Mind at Peace*), for instance, is caught up in an imagined past and orientalises his lover Nuran who, in turn, dismisses this retrospective male melancholy as an inability to live in the present.⁵

Key representatives of the second group of authors Yavuz identifies include Necip Fazıl Kisakürek and Kemal Tahir, both of whom focus despite their ideological differences on the recovery of Ottoman practices, ideas, and state structures in resistance to Westernisation and modernisation processes in Turkey. The third group includes authors and thinkers inspired by Sufism, such as Samiha Ayverdi or Said Nursi. As Yavuz points out, these two groups “*believe that the past can be restored (...) with the help of Islam*” (p. 70). While his focus lies clearly on literary articulations of nostalgia that target the lost grandeur of a powerful Islamic empire, he also uncovers an important aspect often left aside in secondary literature: the partial interwovenness of left and right-wing discourses. Yavuz shows by means of Kemal Tahir’s novels that socialist nostalgia has played a role in legitimising right-wing and Islamist evocations of empire (p. 94). The analysis of Kisakürek’s poetry, plays and articles intriguingly expands on the close

5 See Hemmat, Ayşe Özge Koçak. 2017. ‘The Past as an Object: Orientalist Fantasies’. *Middle Eastern Literatures*. 20.2. 232-251; and Chovanec, Johanna. Forthcoming. ‘Between Orient and Occident: The Construction of a Post-Imperial Turkish Identity in Ahmet Hamdi Tanpinar’s Novel *Huzur*’. In Edtstadler, Katharina; Folie, Sandra; Zocco, Gianna (eds.). *New Perspectives on Imagology*. Brill.

relationship between (today's) politics and literature, between ideology and arts. Those of Yavuz' readers unfamiliar with the Turkish language will discover a broad range of influential authors who are yet to be translated.

In line with the definition of neo-Ottomanism as an "*emotional, nostalgic identity*" that aims at forming Turkish society on the basis of what is perceived as Ottoman and Islamic heritage (p. xii), a key feature of the literary nostalgia Yavuz examines is the expression of "*alternative identities*" that turn their back on the Kemalist and secular outlook of the early Republic of Turkey. As Yavuz comprehensibly sets forth, the concept of neo-Ottoman nostalgia is arguably fitting for writers who have influenced politicians like Turgut Özal and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Not all literary texts dealing with the Ottomans are nostalgic⁶, however, and not all post-imperial melancholic narratives are mourning the loss of a powerful Islamic empire. Yavuz' study hence provides the foundation for linking research on nostalgia with the study of other literary expressions of post-imperial retrospection. Sema Kaygusuz' (2012) notion of *karaduygu* ("black feeling"), for instance, addresses the complex intertwinement of literature and politics alluded to above by addressing the silence that concerns a past that cannot be talked about. Unmasked as a politically opportunist and marketable discourse, the author criticises neoliberal articulations of nostalgia and reminds us of the necessity to also remember late Ottoman and early republican experiences of non-Muslims that have not become part of official historiography. Just like 19th century Ottomanism, as an overarching idea of social cohesion and loyalty towards the empire, had its non-Muslim and Arab⁷ advocates, memories of lost homeland also play an important role in Greek⁸ or Armenian⁹ memory discourses.

Yavuz' chapter "Sites of Ottoman Memory" hence provides not only a fascinating discussion of the complex intertwinement of literary and political imagination of imperial grandeur but also an important vantage point for further research on how the post-imperial is literarily imagined in Turkey and beyond. More generally, *Nostalgia for*

6 See e.g. Livaneli, Zülfü. 1996. *Engereğin Gözündeki Kamaşma*. İstanbul: Can Yayınları.

7 See respectively Elfenbein, Madeleine. 2021. 'Unruly Children of the Homeland: Ottomanism's Non-Muslim Authors'. In Chovanec, Johanna and Heilo, Olof (eds.). *Narrated Empires: Perception of late Habsburg and Ottoman Multinationalism*. Series: Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe. Cham: Palgrave. 99-119; and Guth, Stephan. 2021. 'Arab Perspectives on the Late Ottoman Empire'. In Chovanec, Johanna and Heilo, Olof (eds.). *Narrated Empires: Perception of late Habsburg and Ottoman Multinationalism*. Series: Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe. Cham: Palgrave. 121-148.

8 See Venezis, Elias. 1943. Aeolian Earth (Αιολική Γη); Hirschon, Renée. 2018. 'Enduring Bonds of Place: Personhood and the Loss of Home'. In Raudvere, Catharina (ed.). *Nostalgia, Loss and Creativity in South-East Europe*. Series: Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe. Cham: Palgrave. 213-236; and Willert, Trine Stauning. 2019. *The New Ottoman Greece in History and Fiction*. Series: Modernity, Memory and Identity in South-East Europe. Cham: Palgrave.

9 See Korkmaz, Ayşenur. 2020. 'At 'Home' Away from 'Home': The ex-Ottoman Armenian Refugees and the Limits of Belonging in Soviet Armenia'. *Journal of Migration History* 6.1. 129-150.

the Empire covers an impressive range of phenomena related to the return of Ottoman lifeworlds in Turkish society and underlines the importance of interdisciplinary dialogue on imperial legacies. Paying attention to the interrelatedness of politics and literature, Yavuz' book is an insightful contribution set to become a key reference not only in political science but also in cultural studies.