
Sevgi Soysal and Her Works: Literacy Disclosure of Military Coercion in the Modern Turkish State the 1970s

di

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Abstract: Dopo una breve presentazione della scrittrice Sevgi Soysal, il saggio si sofferma su tre dei suoi romanzi: *An Afternoon in Yenisehir*, *Women's Prison Cell* e *The Dawn*. La prima opera narra la crisi di identità di tre diverse personalità e gli effetti della situazione politica degli anni Settanta. La seconda ricostruisce le condizioni di vita nelle carceri femminili e la terza si concentra sugli abusi dopo la scarcerazione nei confronti degli ex detenuti di sinistra. Il saggio fa costante riferimento all'analisi di Giorgio Agamben sullo stato autoritario e sugli strumenti che esso usa per controllare la società.

Background

Turkey has a broad and vast variety of experience in state coercion and coups d'état in its political history. There have been two “complete” coups, one in 1960 and the other in 1980, and two “half” coups, in 1971 and 1998. All these undemocratic interruptions of governance had a military face, and, surprisingly, they were legal. This was because they claimed to be “defending the state against any attempt at revolution”, “preventing any attempt to change the legal order of the Turkish Republic” or “safeguarding the constitutional order of the state”. Legally, the Turkish army has had this kind of responsibility since the coup of 1980, but, even before that date, Turkish civil and democratic life received important and irreversible damage from the Military Declaration of 12 March 1971. This declaration led to the stable political equilibrium of the modern Turkish State: the power of the army balanced against the civil political authority.

To live in a country where the state imposes unjustifiable authority and presents its arbitrary conduct as “necessary during an emergency in the legal and democratic modern state” inevitably affects every citizen, but none more than a writer. Writers are generally considered “the witnesses of their epoch”. This refers to their most important responsibility; telling everybody about the inglorious truths in their societies.

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Sevgi Soysal was one of those brave intellectuals living in the Turkish Republic between 1936 and 1976. This writer, who died so prematurely and had to abandon her contributions to the Turkish language so early, was born to a bourgeois family in Istanbul. Having a German mother probably affected her way of thinking. She came to understand that being different in appearance, thinking or race was not a source of shame, but a valuable resource, not only for the person concerned, but for the whole of society. Sevgi Soysal studied philosophy and drama in Germany, and after graduation returned to Turkey. Her writing career began with several unusual stories published in local or national magazines. In these, she mainly dealt with gender conflicts, social fragility and sexuality, social oppression and ordinary city life. In these novels and stories, political movements of Turkey were neither a background nor a central issue. The writer was not insensible to the political chaos of the country, but not really involved in it either. A dramatic change in her writing occurred right after the half-coup that happened on the 12th of March 1971. She was detained for about 11 months in the Turkish Military Prison in Mamak/Ankara and, while there, finished her most important works: *An Afternoon in Yenisehir* and *The Dawn*. Her memoirs of prison days were also published in a book called *Women's Prison Cell*. After that experience, Sevgi Soysal understood much better the state coercion that took place in prisons. She lived as a “thought criminal” with political prisoners, and witnessed every sort of torture, rape, humiliation, psychological oppression and inhumanity. She kept on writing until the time of her tragic death.

Analysis of the “State of Exemption”

To understand Sevgi Soysal’s works in greater depth, I propose to follow in the intellectual footsteps of Giorgio Agamben, who, in his book “State of Exemption” formulated the views of two very important thinkers of the past century, Carl Schmitt and Walter Benjamin. For Schmitt, “the state of exemption” is a period when the government has the right to suspend law in order to stabilize the desirable equilibrium of the state. At such times, the fundamental human rights of citizens can be curtailed, and the state can justify official illegalities, such as torture under arrest or detention without trial, by declaring an emergency and saying that the state is obliged to safeguard the republican order. The state is thus “exempt” from its usual duties of protecting certain individuals. In Agamben’s words: “In every case, the state of exemption marks a threshold at which logic and practice blur into each other and pure violence without *logos* has expression without any real frame of reference” (Agamben 2005, p.40)

In the world of Schmitt, the state, or its representatives such as military forces or administrative bodies (whether their political power is legitimately held through lawful and fair elections or not) has the right to create exemptions from law in an emergency. Thus, totally “unlawful” (i.e against what is written in the constitution or local codes), but still “legitimate” actions may be carried out, creating in a sense their own law. This is one of the most important points that Agamben made: an emergency situation has its own rules and logic operated only “by reason of the state”.

Benjamin, on the other hand, approaches the state of exemption from the judicial point of view and describes it as a process in which the judiciary gives up its own adherence to the law. He emphasizes the fact that the state of exemption does not protect the law or make a new law, but suspends it to respond to “pure violence”. Pure violence comes from the soul of the society; it is the anger which launches political rebels and revolutions. Briefly, Benjamin tries to always connect the state of exemption to “illegalities”, while Schmitt tries to give it a legal face by making a link between legal order and the state of exemption.

The army’s position is one of the key issues in Turkish political history. Since the beginning of the 20th century the Turkish army has been proactive in political life and always intervenes to save the country from any “potential” internal or external enemies. Explaining the details of the reasons would mean exceeding the limit of this article, but briefly, this traditional thinking has been passed from one generation of the army to another. Preservation of the Turkish Republic and the Turkish constitution is the primal task of the army. Once social changes begin to threaten the political order of the state, the army blindly intervenes in both civil law and social life. For instance, because of the coups, the Turkish Assembly was several times suspended. In addition, curfew orders deprived people of their fundamental human rights. In conformity with Schmitt’s theory, the Turkish army rationalizes these interventions through law and statutes (mostly by-laws or regulations) such as “The Internal Service Statute” and “Regulation of the Turkish Armed Forces”, where safeguarding the country is clearly stated as one of the responsibilities of the Turkish Army.

What the Turkish people experienced in the 1970s should be analyzed from the viewpoints of the two main groups concerned: the army (or state) and the victims (the people). The state’s reasons are voiced mostly by Schmitt while the victims’ perspective is considered by Benjamin. And Sevgi Soysal always criticizes the Schmittian view, while convincingly defending Benjamin’s humanitarian approach. Being aware that Sevgi Soysal is a writer, we cannot expect her to be impartial while writing about the essence of the era. Also, we should take into account that Sevgi Soysal spent approximately six months in Adana Women’s Prison as a political detainee, not convicted of any crime, before she presented a literary reading of her works.

An Afternoon in Yenisehir

Departing now from the analysis of Agamben, and from his sources in Schmitt and Benjamin, we can find a vivid description of the pro-state exemption in *An Afternoon in Yenisehir*. It is a novel in which people from every social and economic class are portrayed. Thus it goes beyond giving us a passing acquaintance with the period; it reaches deep into heart of society at that time. Its characters include a street-seller and his girlfriend from the underclass, a housewife from the middle class and a university professor from the upper class, all of whom find their voices in the novel. The relationships between the main characters, Olcay, Ali and Dogan, have a noticeable political tone. Ali is a young and dedicated communist from the working class while Olcay and Dogan, brother and

sister, have socialist interests but belong to the Turkish bourgeoisie. The story of these three characters is tied into to the collapse of an old poplar tree and this appears as the strongest image of the novel. It is still being discussed among Turkish critics, but I think the old poplar symbolizes the end of the age of innocence and the call to violence. As defined by Benjamin, the pure violence stemming from society aims to change the legal order. The growing danger of the decaying tree anticipates the developing community which will rebel. In Turkey there was armed rebellion against the old national order after 1971, in parallel with revolutions in other countries in the world. At the end of the book, the tree finally falls on a man from the underclass, whose labor has been exploited by the upper class. This ending seems to have been chosen by Sevgi Soysal to symbolize the economic and political violence caused by the capitalist order.

The Dawn

The psychology of a political detainee is disclosed in depth in *The Dawn*, which was published in 1975. This is a post-1971 novel as well, but it is more focused on the political and legal order of the Turkish state and its oppressive politics and tactics. The main character, Oya, is a leftist artist from Istanbul, exiled to a city in the East part of Turkey, Adana. There, she has to go to the police station every day to give her signature and is continuously under police surveillance. *The Dawn* is one of the rare novels in Turkish literature where the Schmittian tools of the state (or the army) are demonstrated to be widely used during a state of exemption. The second character, Mustafa, is an old convict who has just regained his liberty. He had met with violent conditions of the state in prisons. Oya and her memories of prisons come back into focus when the local police descend on Mustafa's house suddenly. Sevgi Soysal mainly talks about the psychology of Oya and Mustafa who spend a night in police custody, filled with fear of being tortured again, and with broken dreams of freedom. This tension deeply affects Oya and Mustafa and pushes them to examine themselves. The police raid scene, especially vividly depicted in the book, makes the characters question concepts such as punishment and offence. In the Adana police station, Oya continuously asks the police chief whether the investigation and taking of depositions will be done within the framework of law, but she never gets a clear answer. The male police officers humiliate Oya since she is a communist and a woman. Oya thinks about torture while walking to the room where she has to spend a night under arrest:

Abdullah, one of the officers, is walking next to her. The evil on his face does not scare her as it might have before. "What can he do to me? Beating or swearing at the most. He cannot carry out the systematic and scientific torture that I have heard such horrible stories about". Being beaten by Abdullah now seems a ridiculous and even cheerful prospect to Oya, as she compares it to that kind of torture... Hands and toes tied up with electric cables, the fluttering heart which somehow does not explode, being purposely and feloniously held back from the death she longs for, forcibly losing her humanity and femininity in the middle of a lake of blood and puke, feeling an eternal rolling, down and down. And then the truncheon that carries out the ugliest work of the male organ... (Soysal 2002, p. 90. Trans. by Sinem Meral)

Women's Prison Cell

The last book, *Women's Prison Cell* is a witnessing and disclosure book, not a novel, but more like a collection of prison memories. The interesting point is that Sevgi Soysal's use of language at the beginning and at the end is quite different. The reason for this is that she had prison experience both before and after March 12; the systematic use of torture began after this date. Each passage lays bare how tough it was to be a political detainee right after March 12. The reader is made aware of physical and psychological oppression, various torture techniques, and rape while under arrest. The army staff created the concept of the "soldiers'-detainee"; thus victims were automatically under the military chain of command. Appalling events took place during this period, such as the execution of Deniz Gezmiş, Yusuf Arslan and Hüseyin İnan, three very important leftist revolution leaders, and the hijacking of a Turkish Airlines' aircraft. It was like dynamiting society and shaking it with the pure violence described by Benjamin. According to him unlawful acts of the state cannot be rationalized; Soysal's works should be read as concrete evidence of this resistance. For example:

We got used to almost everything but we could not get used to what the torture victims coming into the jail told us, although the story was always the same. The people pursued would get arrested in police raids, their eyes would be tied up, and they would be dragged roughly away. Once in the torture chamber, the person would be stripped to the skin and dressed in bloody and dirty pajamas. While this was going on, the officers, who called each other "my major", "my colonel" etc, hurled words of abuse upon the victim, like "bitch". And they would give their vulgar opinions on the victim's body peculiarities. Then electricity was used, followed by a lot of water, then bastinado, and then walking into the water with swollen feet caused by the bastinado. After that there would be electricity again, and every kind of curse like "f.ck you", "b..tard" etc. Finally there would be rape with the truncheon. (Soysal 2003, p. 95. Trans. by Sinem Meral)

This monumental writer of Turkish literature, Sevgi Soysal, enriches not only our very dark history but also our present times as well. Her novels alert us to the fact that the state is always ready to reduce our democratic gains and react against any movement which attempts to change the actual political equilibrium within the state organization. Whoever holds power will never be willing to leave it of his own free will. Unless we face up to this shameful story, Turkey will go on living within the borders of the state's logic of exemption and there is little hope for our future.

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