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The Everyday of Regime: *The Prophet Song* and the Episteme of the Universal

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This paper attempts to critically examine Paul Lynch's novel *Prophet Song* as one that furthers Western stereotypes about the Other. Its grand narrative of the universal, the paper argues, is Eurocentric and atavistic. A close reading of the novel reveals how even the best intentions, when not adequately examined, can end up reinforcing age-old stereotypes.

Keywords: war, genocide, exile, universal, regime

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Rejimin Sıradanlığı: *Prophet Song* ve Evrenselin Epistemesi

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Bu makale, Paul Lynch'in Prophet Song adlı romanını Batı'nın Öteki'ye ilişkin stereotiplerini yeniden üreten bir eser olarak eleştirel biçimde incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Makale, romanın evrensel olana ilişkin büyük anlatısının Avrupa merkezci ve atavistik bir nitelik taşıdığını ileri sürmektedir. Romanın yakından okunması, yeterince sorgulanmayan en iyi niyetlerin bile köklü stereotipleri yeniden üretme riskini taşıdığını ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: savaş, soykırım, sürgün, evrensel, rejim

This reader picked up Prophet Song because M Mukundan, one of the most important voices of modern Malayalam literature, was reading it at the time. In an article where he discusses the singular place of the novel in informing his view of the world and its people, a site of knowledge withdrawn from the doctrinaire and philosophical, Mukundan remarked that fiction constitutes and broadens sensibility of location and understanding of reality in a way no other form can. Two books that did the work for him whilst he wrote the article was Paul Lynch's Prophet Song and Tess Gunty's The Rabbit Hutch. There is the Emergency in Prophet Song, there is disappearing people, there is a character whose name is Rohith Singh, said the writer (Mukundan 2024). (Mukundan) Prophet Song appears to be an Indian novel. The whole of Europe was reading it. But, it was Mukundan's mention that caught this reader's attention. Primarily, two things stuck out. One, that Mukundan was himself one that had endured the Emergency, which is perhaps the most consequential markers that led to eventual collapse of secularism and systemic effacement of constitutional values in the Indian political context. This gives a certain authenticity to the comment. Two, while the whole of Europe was reading it—indeed, the Booker Prize conferred a celebrity status to the work—Paul Lynch's Irishness did not interfere too much with Prophet Song. There is a certain universality to its trauma, that may just as well be Indian, Irish, Ukrainian, Palestinian or Syrian.

Prophet song is genre-defying fiction. While well-accommodated within the formal features of a novel, its narrative leaves little scope for literary consolations. We are taken through the systemic collapse of a family under a nameless dictatorship. Page after page, the novel pores down in nauseating detail, the everyday of fascism in the context of a family rendered man-less by the regime. Within the first few pages of the book, Eilish's husband, is taken away, very soon, her teenage son is forced to flee for his life and never to return, her second son, brutally raped and killed while he waited for surgery after a shrapnel from crossfire pierces his skull. The narrative is in third person, dry, almost documentarian, deprived of literary accessories,

foregrounding war in present-tense. It is here that the novel attains a terrifying universality. Because this is what war does. It rends, uproots, eradicates; cultures, societies, peoples, families, individuals, lovers, dreamers, the ambitious and the aspiring reduced to non-existence, to *a running thing* without a past or a future, condemned to the tyranny of now. Existence, after all, is the memories of the past and hopes for the future. Without either, the question of survival becomes something of an ironic prank.

From word to word, in a world of curfew and armed hostilities, of fake news and misinformation, mired in the inhospitable present, Lynch's dark prose has the reader confront the death of democracy head on that she can no longer afford the remove of the passive observer. True, Eilish is Irish, white, a scientist, wife of academic, mother of four and is nothing like her, yet, as one of the reviewers observed, the local is everywhere. The sustained effacement of democratic values is global in its concern. For, democratic desire is rooted in humanity—that lone fundamental, sacred ambition that gives existence meaning. Therefore, the addressee of the novel is this reader too from post-secularist India just as much as the European woman with whom she has little in common. There is Emergency in Lynch's dystopia, there is Ayodhya, there are campuses of home which have become the most savage hotbeds of crime, there are multitudinous locations of internecine war, sectarianism, surveillance and conflict; there are "whole desert cities thrown up to shelter the dispossessed, abandoned, terrified populations running for their lives and the breath of their children" . (Morrison)

Prophet Song comes out as ominous, sinister, ruthlessly attacking shared illusions of endurance and expectation. Very quickly, the novel turns claustrophobic, leaves one gasping for air, begging for release; the imminence of the disaster brought home with ingenious clarity. There is hardly time to work up one's defences. There is no ground for preparation.

Engage, it says.

Within the first couple of pages, the reader is rendered exile in this run for cover, evanescent

refuge. There is little relief in literary language, for words too seem like signs defunct in war, emptied of literary retreats, striking a photographic quality. There is, however, one crucial difference: the novel turns this photograph inside out—the zillions of the sort which flood the internet, flipped over—to show what such depictions invariably leave out. The living interiors of the mangled cityscape does not yield to representation: the everydays of the left-behinds, women and children, denied agency and dubbed collateral damage in the obnoxious sport of war. The left-behinds are those who did not leave, who could not leave; whose memories are greater than individual selves, memories that pay no heed to the regime's toys: distractions, as Toni Morrisson calls them, "dreams of loot and themes of superior religion or defiant national pride that enshrine past hurts and humiliations". (Morrison) Memories, alone can persevere against the most blatant violations of the past, imposed amnesia upon which the regime is enthroned and thrives. Memory is place, the quickening of life, like the flutters of the baby still in the womb; of responsibility and delimited existence, of enduring affirmations of futures however absurd they may seem at the moment. Defeated and shamed in her desperate efforts to hold family together, Eilish struggles to find fleeting tales of perfection that were. She thinks of Mark, her teenage son now deemed enemy of the state, quickly in turn to be consumed by the poison around him, turned a seething monster spewing rage and savagery. She thinks of the time when she was pregnant with him, his first movements palpating a world still whole. This is what she is left with, sneering, scalding hope bred on a remote bygone; "hope like cupped water in the hands of a fool searching across some great expanse". (Lynch 222) But for the persistence of memory, there is little defense against the onslaught of power, even if they be intimate fictions. Fragile as these fictions may seem, one dare underestimates their ingenuous power. They bring empires to dust, bring tyrants to their knees.

There is memory in the weather, Eilish observes:

Soon the trees will open their buds again to see the spring light, thinking upon this, the strength

of a tree, how a tree abides the dark season, what a tree sees when it opens its eyes. It is then she sees that her fear is gone, the feeling of relief in her body that something now can be done. (Lynch 85)

One thinks of Faiz, the blood flowers of spring, that stare the regime in the eye, impassible to fear or collective paranoia. *Bahar aayi to jaise yak baar laut aaye…*

It is spring and the ledger is open again/from the abyss where they were frozen those days suddenly return/ the roses return/sorrow returns/I go through page after page/there are no answers and the spring has come again asking the same questions, reopening account after account. (Ali)

On the other hand, the regime manufactures its rituals with an aggressive and retrograde nationalism. The emphatic singing of the national anthem by the groom at the wedding party Eilish attends, that gets all the guests to prop to their feet and sing along with palms pressed to the chest in fervent devotion to the nation, is typical. The appalled Eilish is quickly judged with the threat of grave consequences. Alas, the enduring promise of romance and beauty is replaced with another set of quantifiables like efficiency and productivity upon which the empire shall thrive. The life-affirming gift of love, "the extremely difficult realization that something other than oneself is real", the symbol of the marriage altar. (Murdoch 13) What an awful distraction it is to the empire that is found on the language of use and prowess!

When alternative understandings of reality prove fatal, the grammar of the new real devours the last of the persevering. They respond in the same language, indistinguishable from the captor's. To strike back in same measure so as to avenge purported torments was the creed of the Crusaders, to wash blood with blood, the philosophy of genocide. Carol Sexton's revived belief that protestors will exact revenge in order to put an end to the terror, feeds into the same conflicting dichotomies of good and evil, as well as strength and weakness, that the regime endorses: "The blood of this country will be cleansed once and for all", she says, "you mark my words, it's going to be a beautiful war." (Lynch 167) The reader comes to bear witness to the death

of society, having arrived at the epicentre of violence that breaches even the most resilient democratic fortifications, resulting in unending hostility and carnage.

The novel, like any form of art, seeks meaning in the knowledge it proffers. Prophet Song is a chilling account of mindless violence, chaos and exile. The 'now' strikes out as an open wound that bleeds, squirts worms, oozing only death and darkness. Where is the consolatory power of fiction, one may be led to wonder. How is one to forge tomorrows in the forever-present one is condemned to in the novel, curiously titled Prophet Song? Shouldn't truths, however morbid, ultimately give way to reparations and newer ways of understanding and responding to reality? Is not the fable of the prophet premised on this invitation? Like Eilish, they too have emerged and strode across vast, barren deserts, past horizons of fear and disbelief, with hope cupped like water in their hands—hope, that is renewed understanding of the world and being in it. Brecht, that appears in the novel's epigraph, speaks to a bewildered reader:

In the dark times,
will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times

Knowledge, however, cannot be merely descriptive; instead, offer tools to make sense of reality, so that it may be changed. Abandoning Eilish to exile, gaping against the sea of the unknown, the last pilgrimage, Lynch stops. Silence, unbearable and endless. The reader is left without warning. The final pages are horrifying, impossible to shake out of.

The sudden dawning of silence as the novel jolts to a close is wildly uncomfortable. It is the shrill, needling quiet that ensues from a blast. The novel can longer have the status of the 'whisper in the ear', opines Lynch. According to him, the writer is a mediator in the modern world, one who collects silences. (Simon)The task of the writer is to enable the reader to reach into her silence that holds the solution to the problem, to listen to the whisper of her own oracle. This is by no means an easy task, especially in the modern world that easily drowns it out.

The reader emerges dragging the corpse of Bailey, Eilish's beautiful child brutally raped, his body full of bruises, teeth knocked out, killed, all the while with a shrapnel on his head. This is the image of the un-nameable present, of 13,000 children dead in Palestine. If one were to not succumb to it, one must call one's entire existence into reflection, and alongside, the whole history of humankind.

Thus, begins the singing of all that which cannot, must not remain silent, the song of the prophet—the reader finally configured and with purpose.

Toni Morrisson's words resound in the distance:

> I know the world is bruised and bleeding, and though it is important not to ignore its pain, it is also crucial to not succumb to its malevolence. Like failure, chaos contains information that can lead to knowledge—even wisdom, like art . (Morrison)

All this is commendable. Nevertheless, there are some very serious issues with the way the present is constituted in Lynch's prose. Prophet Song is a Christian novel that construes faith as the greatest defense against lawlessness. Eilish's agnosticism leans against the deliverance of faith to the promised land of certainties. Only the unsuspecting believer can brave the sea of the unknown and she does so armed with hope. When despotism sabotages imagination which is the precondition of hope, there opens a quick route to it in religion. By foregrounding the fundamental hopelessness of the human condition, religion declares: life is elsewhere.

Exile is a grounding motif in all Semitic religions. Whenever a revolution driven by lofty principles succeeds in seizing power, we witness the rapid emergence of regressive religious extremism. For amid the bewildered impetus of the new world, principles that guided transformation become distorted. Religion is the first to take the throne when ideals fade into the background. History is replete with such instances. The problem with Prophet Song is of course

not its Christianity; the problem is the version of Islam it proposes. Despite the unqualified universality of the regime, the novel advances the stereotypes that the West has always projected with regard to the Other. The narrative of the destruction of democracy in Europe and in America is built upon a clearly defined enemy—the fiction of the Muslim. Not only does the novel come to show how terribly constricted its semantic field is when it comes to the Muslim, but also that it chooses to portray Islam as the menace of resurgent atavism. Look how malevolent this presentation is:

> She [Eilish] reads her son's messages and clicks on the video he last watched, a prisoner in a red jumpsuit is on his knees wearing a hood, another man in black stands over him wearing glasses, a teacher or perhaps an intellectual ranting in Arabic, he tears off the prisoner's hood and brings a large and sickled knife while the camera begins to zoom in slow motion as though seeking to perceive something in the eyes of the victim in the instant of his death (...). It strikes her that what has entered her body is the feeling of death, seeing him now almost seventeen years old and the blood corrupt by rage and silent savagery. (Lynch 83-84)

The history of brutality and murder, of beheadings and summary executions is the history of the Islamicate, the novel squarely suggests. For millennia, the West has used this particular tactic to denigrate and dehumanise the rest of the globe.

In one his interviews to NPR, Lynch maintains that there is a reason that he chooses not to identify with the background politics. "I am watching Eilish, I am seeing how she responds to something that has not been properly articulated in fiction before—or at least not in the way I am interested in."

He could not be more mistaken, as this is exactly the discourse of the canon.

From literature's ivory tower, the vision of the world is distinctly Anglo-American. Vast continents of people have been dubbed invisible, their existence 'half-made' as Naipaul

powerfully captured it. The problem of universalism is that it cannot acknowledge the heterogeneity of the human condition, the radically different ways of knowing and being in the world or the wildly incommensurable rituals and practices that give meaning to varied existences. If Ai Weiwei, Dostovesky, Marquez, Atwood, Darwish and Manto could bring readers of the world to reckon the destructive legacy of brute force through their literatures, it is because they have addressed the integrity of the particular. Another problem with universalising trauma is to discount its politics. Violence does not merely turn anyone subjected to it into a 'running thing', but is actively involved in the business of reinventing values. "Violence can exalt one as a martyr or a hero", Susan Sontag observes in *Regarding the Pain of Others*. (Sontag 13) So, when Eilish discovers Mark's search history on his phone and finds videos of mayhem involving Muslims, she has aggressively entered into the trade of labels: Here is the darkness that any civilised society cannot afford to tolerate. Here is absolute sin. Is this not the governing ideology of the contemporary war? In this day of information and relentless visibility, how else can one make sense of the absolute savagery of the war we are caught in, if not through the slogan of 'the West against the rest'? Modern violence, together with its objective of territorial expansion, is grounded in civilizational narratives that cast the West as both the measure and the mandate for the rest of the world.

The book avoids posing difficult questions that could topple strongholds of authority. Its harsh treatment of the modern is a grave indictment which radically trivialises and undermines the disesteemed, both in terms of their place in history and their prospects for the future. What we are left with is a severely skewed depiction of reality, the sorts that force innumerable Rohingyas into a capsizeable present and leave them at sea; that turns Gaza into a myth, that makes Tibet little more than a childish delusion. If a work so deeply problematic has been awarded the Booker, despite two centuries of sustained intellectual labour that exposed Europe's guilt in promoting social exclusion and hampering development in the non-West, one finds that

the ideology of such prestigious literary prizes is that which grievously discounts the dignity of the peoples of the world. We are compelled to recognise the inextricable link between Western literary praise and its imperialist subtext.

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