-Alternative to the modern age? Nostalgia and authenticity in spiritual and religious self-help books in Turkey-

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Over the past few years, a certain trend took on in the bestseller lists. Self-help books using both religious and New Age themes gained popularity countrywide. The writers started appearing on talk shows as guests and became popular figures/orators through social media as well. To understand this popular trend, I draw upon a cultural studies perspective and analyze 10 bestsellers published between 2014-2017. The books I chose are not on some specific part of life (like marriage, child care, work place) but are on almost all kinds of life matters hence offer a total guidance for life. Their scope happens to be so wide, making analysis challenging. Their tone in the books might be categorised as self-help genre at first glance, but with a close reading, differing interpretations of truth, culture and the self emerges. The books were divided into two groups according to this difference: religious and spiritual. I did not start with searching for certain concepts in the books but try to determine the recurring themes and discuss which concepts and styles were chosen over which other possible ones. Nostalgia and authenticity came up as recurrent themes since both group of writers used or referred to them in some manner. The contesting and differing conceptions of these terms became the main concern of this paper as the themes unfolded.

-Notes on methodology-

Drawing on a cultural studies perspective, theoretical inspirations were first and foremost Stuart Hall and Raymond Williams. As Hall states, there is no autonomous popular culture free from relations of power (1982)[1]. Raymond Williams also makes us think popular culture in a historical perspective and pays attention especially to the same functions of different forms throughout the history (1979). To think the popular in relation to hegemony, I take into account the historical dimension of the modern-antimodern divide as it set the tone for the public debate on religion and spirituality in Turkey (Aksit et al, 2016). Inspired by Williams, the similar functions of different forms were considered too, as other trends in the history of

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[1] Hall states that the study of popular culture should begin with popular culture's "double movement of containment and resistance" (1982, p. 228).

self-help in Turkey and *hidayet* novels[2] of the Islamic movement were briefly revisited to understand the functions of this emergent form (I do this mostly in the conclusion).

I quote the writers in English and translations are my own. Since there is too much material to discuss, I can only draw on certain examples from the books. (Italics are my own).

-Notes on the context/hegemony-

To understand the texts, the context gains importance and the history of the country (especially the Islamist movement's rise to power) should be reflected upon. Turkey experienced a modernization process since (and even before) its formation as a secular state in 1923. This modernization process involved a silencing of Islamist movement and situating Islam as antimodern.Thus Islamists could not come up with political demands until the 1970s, though this movement has connection with conservatives since the early years of modernization (Bora, 1999). From the early years of modernization, conservatives (read Islamists) accepted adopting the modern technique/technology 'but not the culture and moral' of the West. This way the Western and modern lifestyle was criticized and still in 1950s and 1960s the conservatives' sense of losing the authentic (Islamic) lifestyle was their main concern. The conservative-Islamist voice thus was more reactionary (Bora, 1999) than constitutive since the Islamists were not in power. After the military coup in 1980, neoliberal politics of economy were implemented by the first civic government. At the same years, the invention of a Turkish-Islamic synthesis took place against the potential left politics: Religious culture and moral education became compulsory in the curricula of primary and secondary schools (Hale and Ozbudun, 2010, p. xx). The right way to become a citizen was thus started being understood in this context while neoliberal economy policies since 1980 helped emergence of an Islamic bourgeoisie. The Islamist movement as an economic power and as a political party gained power in this respect, 1994 was a critical year with their municipal election victories. With general elections in 1996, Islamists (Welfare Party-RP) became the senior partner of the coalition government. The successor of this Islamist party, AKP (Justice and Development Party-JDP) won the elections and formed the government on its own in 2002. Being in power ever since, I consider AKP as the main actor of hegemony[3], with considering certain changes in its' character through the years. The current politics (and

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[2] Hidayet: True path (through living Islamic faith).
[3] Being the main actor also means having power over defining the right way of being and becoming a *citizen*, which is closely linked to the constitution of the *self*. This study is concerned with these concepts as well, since analyzing the relation between the popular and the hegemony calls for considering this link.

rhetoric) can be defined not as a conservative-democratic (as once AKP used to define itself in its' early years) but as an Islamic authoritarian one from 2010 on forward (Turk 2014; Atay 2017). Since the party and Erdoğan gained more power via referandum in 2010, it is evident in both policies and rhetorics with almost every social matter being emphasized through Islamic concepts and references, Islam started being referred as the core of the 'citizen ethic' by the government (Koyuncu, 2014). [4]

These Islamic connotations have some close links with nostalgia in the cultural realm. Nostalgia as popular sentiment in 2010s can be read through popular cultural products like TV series and films as well, since the Ottoman past is appraised in the series *Dirilis*, broadcasted on TRT (public broadcasting channel) with high ratings. I claim that this nostalgia for the Ottoman past is now crucial in constituting hegemony in an Islamic tone.

-The self and self-help in this context, popular Sufism-

On the other hand, neoliberal politics gained momentum throughout the years, making lives more competitive and fragile at the same time. Though not a developed form of capitalism, more freelance and 'no-long term' jobs rised among the middle class (especially in the 2000s), and economic crisis hit in 2001 and 2008, the lives became more insecure and volatile. This may account for the characteristics of the first era of self help books in Turkey (from 1990s to mid 2000s) with focus on work life, since the implementation of the neoliberal politics matured in early 1990s. 'Business' and 'success' emerged as the most popular focuses among self help (Mumin Sekman might be the strongest example with his bestselling books and book club). 'Success' required being flexible and fast, having an impressible personality were valued in these self-help books (Aydın Sevim, 2013) in the same way neoliberal culture demands these attributes from the self.

It was not until the 2000s that psy discourse emerged in self-help books, making 'psyche' the center of the quest for success and happiness. A slow variation also occurred in the popular realm: The language for the quest of happiness started being accompanied by a search for 'the soul' and for 'the secret'. One might say by the late 2000s the main concern was becoming the 'secret to life, soul, happiness' in most popular culture products. This emergence of the *secret* as a trend in self-help books took place short after the popularization of this theme via crime fiction novels and other bestselling books (like Elif Safak's mystery

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[4] The political rhetoric on immigrants can be given here. Hospitality and tolerance was presented (by the government) as the main core of Islam so that good citizens would be living in harmony with the immigrants (Koyuncu, 2014).

drama on Sufi figures Sems-ı Tebrizi and Rumi) (Tufekcioglu, 2011). This popularity occurred not in a free realm from power since a cultural year was dedicated to Mevlana Rumi (a Sufi figure) by UNESCO in 2007. It also made way to the commercialization of such wisdom elsewhere, the Mevlevi dance ritual (*semah*) started being performed as a spectacle in municipal occasions is an example (Bolukbası, 2016).[5] One can say that, "popular curiosity towards a mystified past in a time of uncertainty, combined with the commercialization of content, converges in a rediscovery of history" (Jing, 2006, p. 362). This rediscovery of history included both the quest for the authentic self through *authentic* wisdom like Sufism and the commercialization of such wisdom.

-Analysis-

The advice for the self involves some conception of truth and the self, and this conception of truth in these books relies so much on the claim that something's wrong in the contemporary culture. Thus I start with discussing how they speak of the modern age (or modernization) and try to determine what they suggest for the self. It should be here mentioned as an early statement that there is no tangible and analytic critique towards modern life, but the texts are *pathos-intense*, preferring invoking some feeling over explaining or arguing.

One writer, Oztekin who uses overtly religious themes and symbols writes:

> "Once upon a time, Ramadans[6] would arrive. You'd say 'Here comes Ramadan, the long waited lover'. You'd understand whichever city whichever street you'd look at. The country would become Ramadan from head to toe. Ramadan used to mean sharing, acquintance of the poor and the rich. It was to unite. So the Bayrams... (...) Then we just forgot. We forgot to live, forgot to breathe, and one day came we forgot to love. (...) Everyone's angry these days, everyone's bitter, no one loves one another (...) They don't even love God (*Allah*), they just pretend to fear" (Oztekin, 2016, p. 17).

The certain emphasis on loss and the tone of discomfort is evident. *Losing* Ramadans is used in relation to losing a certain lifestyle and shifts into losing virtues like sharing. This loss happens to be in accordance with some conception of the 'authentic community', the community living according to Islam, living Ramadan. Though it's not clearly pointed in this

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[5] Sufism has been and still is widely thought as a humanist philosophy in New Age accounts. Nonetheless, historians of Islam usually emphasised that it derived from the very roots of Islam and Islamic cemaats (Ocak, 2011).

[6] Fasting period of the Muslims, a whole month in every 11 months. *Bayram;* ending festives of the fasting period, lasting three days.

passage (except the emphasis on everyone being bitter, angry), one can argue the blame is on the modern (urban) life since its enstrangering effect on the lives of the people is mentioned elsewhere in the book. Not the modernization process is manifested guilty but a feeling of nostalgia passes to the audience, since there's some discontent about losing something once was here and now gone. Love as a virtue and as an end in itself is associated with this Islamic lifestyle per se. Although he might be referring to a recent past, I argue that this nostalgia functions as melancholy; and resembles the reactionary view of the Islamists in the early modernization years.[7] It does not direct readers to take action collectively whatsoever but elaborate 'the painful yearning to return home' which happens to be the very definition of nostalgia (Davis, 1977, p. 414).

In another passage though, Oztekin takes a more authoritarian tone and implicitly otherize/marginalize the secular lifestyle: 'Aren't the bad people the first to leave (a gathering) when there's only tea to drink?' (2015, p. 84) implicitly refers to alcohol consumption of the secular, since among the Islamic movement the alternative to secular socialization is highly defined in conservative terms and the disapproval of alcohol has been a crucial aspect of this socialization. This might be the reason for Islamic movement's romanticization of drinking tea, relating it to the pious conversation (*sohbet*[8]) and lifestyle.

Another popular writer using religious themes and terms, Kosar likewise thinks authenticity in relation to Islam. Being a good, sincere Muslim is the main focus of his books and advises remembering God (Allah) in every moment of life (2015, p. 21-23). The relation he sees between being good and happy is grounded only on the certain link he offers, through Islamic faith. Islamic faith emerges as the only cure and condition, with him mentioning the loss of Islamic faith among community as the main problem (Kosar, 2015; 2016) thus his narrative becomes implicitly more totalitarian. His narrative form also functions as nostalgia since he references to Islamic lifestyle of the era of Prophet Muhammed as the authentic one, he frequently benefits from the stories of pious people of the era.

Ozdemir pursues this trend, this yearning for the past, claiming 'there used to be *edep* (an appropriate way of behaving to one another referencing Islam), 'there used to be respect/there used to be love....'' (Ozdemir, 2015). The iteration of "used to" turns the text almost into poetics, aiming for *pathos*. The feeling is similar to that of Oztekin's, doubt and

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[7] With this example one can see that the Islamization in the political realm is not exactly accompanied by an increased piety among the people.

[8] The tarikat's conversation among each other (usually leaded by the scheikh) on what's right or wrong according to Islam is called sohbet (Silverstein, 2008). As in everyday life *sohbet* is used for conversation in general. These writers I mentioned clearly uses it with Islamic connotations, referring to a conversation not among a certain tarikat/organization but among pious people.

discontent towards contemporary culture is overt, although the critique towards the contemporary culture remains mostly implicit. Arguing for being respectful to the elderly and to the pious is emphasized but accounts on pious lifestyle as the crucial ethic and as an alternative seems limited to this extent.

Another way of referring to nostalgia in the religious group of writers might be mentioned here. The use of fonts and graphics resembling those of Qur'an and Islamic calligraphy is frequent in this group of books. This resemblence should be seen important since the calligraphies has nowadays become the nostalgic figures of the long-gone (Ottoman and Islamic) past (Schick, 2011). Bali (2010) reminds us that Islamic bourgeoisie of the 1990s had these calligraphies in their decoration of homes as a distinction practice: The distinction from *regular* Muslims as well as from the secular groups.

While this is the case for the religious group, New Age writer Hara tells us to "remember something that we do not know" (2017) and produces nostalgia in a different manner. On some conscious level we may not know what's right for us or the secret to truth, rather it lies somewhere beneath our mind: Our soul, which is often associated with childhood and innocence. This appraisal of childhood and the yearning for joy, purity and innocence is accompanied by the narration of loss. We, as modern human beings, according to Hara, stained what's once was pure and authentic. Again, Hara describes the process of exploring the authentic self as a face-to-face conversation with his child-self (2017) and tries to get inspired by his child-self's joy[9]. This emphasis in some occasions quickly shifts into being childish, since the childish behaviour is appraised and preferred in all circumstances[10]. Similar to religious writers, urban life emerges as the main reason and space of this loss, but through a different reasoning: High buildings and residences of the city life distances us from the soil, we keep unattached to our roots. It's clear from this reasoning that the *authentic self* is also imagined as embedded in the nature. What's wrong in this culture can (and should) be cured entirely through exploring the authentic (joyful) self since the authentic self is seen as part of the divine.

A similar vein can be found in Isınsu, another bestseller writer. She too refers to childhood as pure and closer to the truth, but emphasizes a return to the natural and authentic state as a future-vision as well:

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[9] His book's subtitle is "meeting the inner self".

[10] I also think that being a grown-up is taken for granted in these texts, and functions as another way of devaluing the potential for reason and collective action.

"one day will come and we will all be in a better and true communication with each other through our telepathic powers. There will be no lies or wars but only love. Human beings will return to their essence. (...) You just want to return to where you belong, that's all" (Isınsu, 2016, p. 15-16).

The *return* here points to falling apart from the divine (love) and back: "The cure is to be one with the unity, to contact the main source, the cure is what should be" (Isınsu, 2016, p. 21). Here this example too can be understood in terms of nostalgia, since what she offers is a sense of belonging home and yearning for being at home, at the right place. To regain the essence and to return to the authentic state, one must do the rituals the writer offers.

Conclusion-Last Thoughts

As I read the texts, I came across with certain recurring themes and styles: nostalgia and authenticity. The search for the authentic was closely related to nostalgia since the authentic was the standpoint for the nostalgic tone in the books. Throughout the study, I realized the differing connotations of authenticity: When religious group of books speak in a nostalgic manner, they refer to some *authentic community* and what's authentic is usually seen as an Islamic one, with modern life (and modernization process) being an obstacle to this authenticity. The religious writers' use of they/we dichotomy is a crucial device in this narrative, it is most evident in the writings of Oztekin, as quoted above. This way this group in some manner resembles the functions of *hidayet* novels, where the right path to live was told through the fictional characters' *waking up to the truth* and start living the Islamic faith (Gunay Erkol and Caliskan, 2016). The only difference here is the offering of the right path does not occur through fiction but through another form, a form resembling of a long essay or a self-help book. Oztekin is a distinctive example in this group since he doesn't only talk about what's wrong in contemporary culture but also otherize/marginalize the other. This way his accounts are compatible with the authoritarian tone of the contemporary (Islamist) political rhetoric.

On the other hand, writers using New Age themes see human beings responsible for what's wrong in contemporary culture in general, and the alternative they offer is to explore the *authentic self*. This authentic self is associated with childhood, and the wisdom also is situated in the childhood period of life. The sense of loss and yearning is the main characteristic driving the narrative in both groups, making possible for me to claim that they are both nostalgic. The major difference happens to be the direction of this quest for authenticity; *self* in New Age and *community* in the religious group.

What these texts offer in terms of the self and the ethic is crucial for thinking on the hegemonic definitions of citizenship. Given the examples, I argue that they do not offer any collective action as an alternative and find the worldly politics irrelevant since they are preoccupied with exploring the self in order to live 'joy, happiness' 'secret', or yearning for the (Islamic) past in a melancholic manner. Despite, the religious writers' accounts and tone serve as a contribution to the Islamic authoritarian/totalitarian tone of the political rhetoric, since they offer the Islamic faith as the only true path to authenticity.

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