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Book Review

Çağdaş Amerikalı Zenci Romancılar (Contemporary African American Novelists) by E. Lâle Demirtürk, 1997, 240 pages. Available from: Gündoğan Yayınlan, Bayındır Sok. 6/12, Kızılay, Ankara.

Ayşe Lahur Kırtunç

Lâle Demirtürk's extensive analysis of contemporary African American novelists has a long introductory chapter in which she outlines the historical and cultural background of black American novelists. She also includes three early novels in her introduction: *Iola Leroy, or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) by Frances E. W. Harper, *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900) by Charles W. Chesnutt, and *Quicksand(1928)* by Nella Larsen. In these three novels, Demirtürk sets a background for the economic and social determinants of a divided racial identity, particularly with reference to biracial women and their plight within the context of miscegenation during slavery. Demirtürk asserts that these three novels constitute a background for later work because in all three works, the heroines (Iola, Rena and Helga) negate their sexuality as an escape from the restrictions of sexual discrimination (57). In all three post-Civil War novels, the biracial women have been analyzed as being "the tragic mulatto," which, Demirtürk points put, is a traditional stereotype.

The book is then divided into two main sections: men and women novelists. In the chapter on men novelists, Demirtürk analyzes *Native Son* (1940) by Richard Wright, *Invisible Man* (1952) by Ralph Ellison,Go *Tell It On The Mountain* (1953) by James Baldwin, and *The Autobiography Of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) by Ernest Gaines. In this section, Demirtürk approaches the novels from the perspective of how racism destroys black male identity and turns the black male into an object, or into the "other." She points out examples from the novels which make use of the potency and determinism of images of the "other" created by the dominant non-black culture, images which enslave the subject as well as the object (104).

In the last section, Demirtürk analyzes Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1969), *Sula* (1973), *Song Of Solomon* (1977), *Beloved* (1987), and *Jazz* (1992), Alice Walker's *The Third Life Of Grange Copeland* (1970), *Meridian* (1976), *The Color Purple* (1982), *The Temple Of My Familiar* (1989), *andPossessing The Secret Of Joy* (1992), and Gloria Naylor's *The*

Women Of Brewster Place (1982). In this section, Demirturk depicts how the characters deal with different roles as black women. She points out that an internalization of negative values related to being a black woman in a racist and sexist society constitutes a common theme in most of the novels. The characters feel an urgent need to find a new frame of reference independent of cultural stereotypes propagated by the non-black hegemony. In most cases, this new frame of reference necessitates a need for self-realization through the re-creation of a new, unified identity: an identity which is at peace with being black and being a woman in a racist and patriarchal society. This new cultural identity would make it possible to see the traps laid by culturally biased discourse, which shapes consciousness.

The language used in the book presents the problem of assumed audience when writing about culture-specific topics. The writer provides the English equivalents of such terms as “life-story” (30), “folklore” (30), “Declaration of Independence” (9), “Great Depression” (32), “Black Power” (32) and “World War II” (30) which seem self-explanatory or are semantically well-established within the Turkish idiomatic usage. The level of sophistication she assumes for her audience should not necessitate such an explanatory endeavor. On the other hand, the writer does not feel a need to provide Turkish explanations or definitions for such terms as “mulatto” (22), “ghetto” (3), “ritual” (28), or “the Union Army” (45). Similar anxiety about linguistic and cultural reciprocity is prevalent throughout the introductory chapter where almost every sentence is footnoted, including such straightforward factual information as the date of publication of a novel and the date when an author received a literary prize (50). In an effort to set up the paradigmatic framework against which she will later foreground her analytical chapters, Demirtürk undertakes a somewhat short-winded summarization of recent cultural theory. Her quality of writing is not uniform: some chapters such as Chapter 8 on Toni Morrison are particularly well-researched and the material is extensively analyzed. Others such as Chapter 7 on Ann Petry are, however, sketchy and skimpy.

The book is a welcome addition to the relatively few critical works written in Turkish about American literature. It would be of major interest to scholars of American culture and literary studies in general. The book is also highly commendable for undertaking to inform the Turkish intelligentsia, scholars, students, and literati about an important group of American writers who share a unique cultural heritage.