It is precisely at this moment, while new or very old and frightening frontiers appear or reappear, those of nationalistic, racial, or religious exclusions – it is worthwhile to recall the fiction of an island appearing at the dawn of a period for which the present time would be the twilight.¹

**Dismissed by Kemalist Turkey** as a shameful legacy of backwardness and obscurantism, the Ottoman Empire was recently rediscovered as a model of peaceful coexistence among several religious and ethnic groups. This engagement in imperial nostalgia that swept Turkey in the 1980s has received the name of ‘neo-Ottomanism,’ and became one of the country’s major ideologies of today.² This essay examines a unique form of Ottoman imperial nostalgia in contemporary Turkish literature, the Ottoman utopia, through a critical assessment of literary and political neo-Ottomanism and its celebration of the Ottoman Empire as a successful multicultural model. Discussing two journalistic columns and one novel by the Turkish American author Elif Shafak, my study will clarify the structure and purposes of the Ottoman utopia, highlighting how it may represent a synthesis of the yearning for the lost Ottoman Empire with a sustained fascination for American culture and narratives. Ottoman utopia arguably offers the apparently paradoxical possibility of an americanized Ottoman Empire and it can

be understood as an important step in the development of Turkey’s ‘global’ identity, envisioning the Turkish nation as a ‘contradictory synthesis’ built on numerous layers of cultural influences and overlapping legacies.

**Neo-Ottomanism: Imperial Nostalgia in Turkish Politics and Literature**

Starting in 1980, after decades of unchallenged predominance, Kemalist nationalism in Turkey entered a crisis that lead to a shift in perception of Turkey’s imperial past. Since the birth of the Turkish Republic in 1923, with Mustafa Kemal Atatürk as its president, the Kemalists have dismissed the Ottoman and Islamic tradition as retrograde, obscurantist, and damaging for the image of Turkey as a modern westernized republic. They preferred to base the idea of republican Turkishness on narratives of secularism and ethnic assimilation – establishing the beginning of Turkish history in 1923, in conjunction with the birth of the Republic. Yet, under the influence of Prime Minister Turgut Özal, the 1980s saw the emergence of an alternative ideology known as neo-Ottomanism, a current whose main scope was to retrieve those cultural and religious elements Kemalism had banned from Turkish history and identity in order to pursue an “exclusively Western trajectory.”

The most prominent feature of neo-Ottomanism is its preference of multiculturalism and ethnic diversity over Kemal’s ideal of an ethnically homogeneous Turkey, emphasizing the need to rediscover the virtuosity of Ottoman society, when the peaceful coexistence of diverse ethnic and religious groups was allegedly made possible by a tolerant, cosmopolitan empire. In modern times, this ‘Ottoman nostalgia’ translated into a foreign-policy agenda showing equal openness towards both the empire’s former territories and the West, deriving from the wish to formulate an all-encompassing idea of Turkish identity, rather than an exclusively Western one.

The Ottoman tradition is used by neo-Ottomanist ideologists as a base upon which a political, social, and moral alternative to Kemalism could be constructed – not a thing of the past, but, in the words of Yılmaz Çolak, “a model for the identity and political unity questions of the present.”

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