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Penelope Fitzgerald'ın "Sahaf"* Romanında Yabancılaşma[1]

Defamiliarization in Penelope Fitzgerald's Novel "The Bookshop"

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to reveal how Penelope Fitzgerald (1916-2000), the well-known English writer, employs defamiliarization device in her second novel *The Bookshop* (1978). Penelope Fitzgerald is mainly known for her distinctive and elegant style, called by many critics the "*quiet genius*" of the late twentieth-century English fiction. She can also be called the master of the uncanny, or *ostranenie* (making it strange), as the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky defined it. Penelope Fitzgerald brings quite new and original interpretations to the familiar concepts like morality, courage, kindness, help and hope. Through the literary concept of defamiliarization, the reader gains a new awareness of these issues. In her novels, essays, reviews and letters, she surprises the reader by defamiliarizing these well-known notions, loading them with new meaning and surprising the reader with the newly discovered truths which had always been there unnoticed by readers. By doing so, Penelope Fitzgerald's aim is far from lifting the readers' hearts. On the contrary, she tries to draw their attention to the life without any illusions, life "as it really is."

Key Words: *Penelope Fitzgerald, "The Bookshop", defamiliarization, paradoxical ideas, morality, courage.*

Öz

Bu makalenin amacı, tanınmış İngiliz yazar Penelope Fitzgerald'ın (1916-2000) *Sahaf*'(1978) isimli ikinci romanında *yabancılaştırma tekniğini* kullanma şeklini analiz etmektir. Birçok eleştirmen tarafından geç yirminci yüzyıl İngiliz romanının "*sessiz dâhisi*" olarak anılan Penelope Fitzgerald, kendine özgü ve zarif tarzıyla bilinmektedir. Ahlak, cesaret, nezaket, yardım etme ve umut etme gibi aşina olduğumuz kavramlara oldukça yeni ve özgün bir yorum kazandırmasından dolayı *esrarengiz*, ya da Rus formalist Viktor Şklovski'nin ileri sürdüğü *ostranenie* kavramının ustası olarak da bilinir. Edebi bir kavram olan *yabancılaştırma tekniği* yoluyla, okuyucu bu gibi kavramlara yeni bir farkındalık kazanır. Romanlarında, denemelerinde, incelemelerinde ve mektuplarında aşina olduğumuz bu kavramları *yabancılaştırarak* ve onlara yeni anlamlar yükleyerek gözlerden kaçmış saklı gerçeklerle okuyucuyu şaşırtır. Penelope Fitzgerald bunları yapmak suretiyle okura haz vermenin ötesine geçerek okurun dikkatini illüzyonsuz, "olduğu gibi" bir hayata çekmeye çalışmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Penelope Fitzgerald, "Sahaf", yabancılaştırma tekniği, paradoksal fikirler, ahlak, cesaret.*

* The novel *The Bookshop* has not been translated into Turkish yet. But the film version of the book was demonstrated under the name *Sahaf*.

[1] Bu makale, Yeşim Sultan AKBAY'ın "*Penelope Fitzgerald'ın Kurgusal Olmayan Dünyasında Kendini Gerçekleştirme*" başlıklı devam etmekte olan doktora tezinden türetilmiştir. Tez başlığı, zaman içerisinde değişiklikler gösterebilir. This article has been derived from Yeşim Sultan AKBAY's ongoing PhD dissertation titled "*Actualization of Self in Penelope Fitzgerald's Non-Fictional World.*" The title may change in its final form.

Penelope Fitzgerald: A Distinctive and Graceful Voice*

Judging by Penelope Fitzgerald's reviews, Dean Flower, in her article "A Completely Determined Human Being," emphasizes the importance of the following questions for the writer: "…*what sort of person wrote the book, what sort of family was involved, and what ultimate human value does it have*."[2] In the light of this, it would be quite appropriate to briefly summarize Penelope Fitzgerald's own life before focusing on her novel.

Born into a highly educated family in 1916 from which she inherited great values like modesty, truth-telling, coping skills, love of poetry and the ability to encounter all sorts of challenges, Penelope Fitzgerald, nee Knox, spent her entire life, including her childhood, in a very intellectual atmosphere. She was an Oxford graduate with a first and had always been determined to become an author, though she had always been a writer. However, life had other plans for Penelope Fitzgerald. She married the Irish lawyer and army officer Desmond Fitzgerald with whom life she "*always knew* […] *was not going to be easy*."[3] She had to teach to make ends meet, she lived on a Thames barge, which eventually sank with many of her paperwork, letters and manuscripts. She had three children to raise and look after, and later a terminally ill husband to take care of. She started publishing her first book at 58 and became famous in her 80s.* Her life is one of the best examples of a female experience at an advanced age.

There were so many unjust comments relating to her extraordinarily meaningful life. Michael Dibdin who is of a high opinion of her to the point that he compares her to Jane Austen (though she always winced at the remark),[4] surprises us by stating that despite "*the dullness of her life, she should write not only one novel, but several, and they are very good, too*."[5] It remains only to wonder how one can possibly call her life "dull." It was really hard, challenging, full of predicaments but far from being dull. She was different from any other contemporary female writer as regards her private as well as literary life. Her life did not fit Virginia Woolf's well-known statement: "*A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.*"[6] Penelope Fitzgerald never had a room of her own, moreover, she never had a bedroom of her own but she became a late-blooming writer and author, and was able to write her ideas down even in the stuffy teaching room of the school where she was teaching. She expressed the ideas perhaps shaped long ago waiting impatiently for release.[7] She never had any servants, she never had any property in her life, and as her daughter remarks, she never knew exactly what the word "*mortgage*" meant.[8] Her novels that keep today's literary critics very busy praising her mostly, used to get scything or ironic criticism considering some of her novels having "*amateur charm, but they read like novellas written by an old lady for other old ladies*."[9] More bitter criticism

* Only two novels from Penelope Fitzgerald's canon have been translated into Turkish in 2018; *The Blue Flower* as *Mavi Çiçek*, and *Offshore* as *Salapurya Mahallesi* by Can Yayınları (Publishing House).

[2] Flower 2005, 584.

[3] Lee 2013, 83.

* The next 20 years of her life she wrote three biographies, nine novels, many short stories, essays and reviews; *Edward Burne-Jones* (1975), *The Knox Brothers* (1977), *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends: With a Selection of Her Poems* (1984), *The Golden Child* (1977), *The Bookshop* (1978), *Offshore* (1979), *Human Voices* (1980), *At Freddie's* (1982), *Innocence* (1986), *The Beginning of Spring* (1988), *The Gate of Angels* (1990), *The Blue Flower* (1995, UK, 1997, US), *The Means of Escape* (2000), *A House of Air* (US title: *The Afterlife*) (2005), *So I Have Thought of You: The Letters of Penelope Fitzgerald* (2008).

[4] Sutcliffe 1998, n.p.

[5] Read 2014, n.p.

[6] Woolf 2008, 4.

[7] Flower 2005, 582.

[8] Lee 2013, 142.

[9] Knight 2016, 5.

belongs to John Walsh's demolishing description of her as "*an intellectual bombshell turned bag lady*."[10]

Today, there are multitudes of articles singing her praise to the skies, which she fully deserves. She is a female writer of character with a "*touch of genius,*"[11] a writer who became an author after sixty, the author like no one else, the "*mistress of the sublime*,"[12] the writer whose novels' effect was compared to music, a writer who was "*drawn to people who seem to have been born defeated or, even, profoundly lost*."[13] She never struggled to make a name for herself or to market her books. She did her best to make art a shared experience in her family, going to the theatre, concerts, and traveling at the expense of a comfortable life.

Christopher J. Knight considers her lateness a strength rather than weakness. He is rightly annoyed at those for whom her belatedness as a writer becomes a factor diminishing the writer's performance. After her death in 2000, the literary world welcomed her with great appreciation and admiration, her novels were ranked among the best novels,[14] and she is considered to be one of the greatest British writers of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century.[15]

"*What makes literature art is precisely its depiction of life as it really is.*

Its charge is the unconditional and honest truth."

— Anton Chekov

The unusual concept *ostranenie* (making strange), also known as "*defamiliarization, deautomatization, alienation, estrangement*"[16] is widely employed in literature, poetry and film studies. The word was coined by the famous Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky, according to whom

> The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects unfamiliar, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged.[17]

The device is against the expression of the habitual and well known things in art. Long before Shklovsky, as back as the 4th century BC, Aristotle, without using the word *defamiliarization* considered it important that "*poetic language must appear strange and wonderful.*"[18] Alan Hollinghurst, commenting on Penelope Fitzgerald's novels, observes: "*Hers was very much the art that hides art, and she had besides a horror of explanation*" and "*recurrence of the uncanny.*"[19] In the same vein, Dean Flower does not conceal her confusion at Penelope Fitzgerald's out of the ordinary ideas. For instance, this is how Penelope Fitzgerald describes some characteristic features of her famous father, the editor of *Punch* (1932-1949):

[10] Knight 2016, 7.
[11] Fitzgerald 2009, ix.
[12] Tonkin 2000, n.p.
[13] Fitzgerald 2005, 508.
[14] **See:** The Times, 2008.
[15] **See:** McCrum, 2015.
[16] **See:** Oever 2010, 12.
[17] Shklovsky 1965, 12.
[18] Lively 2019, 113.
[19] Hollinghurst 2014, n.p.

> Just as his light verse is based on strong-mindedness, so his kindness was based on courage, and what always goes with true courage, reticence. To be thanked was for Evoe a dreadful experience. He was often unwilling even to be acknowledged. But something of what he was like can be guessed, even by those who never knew him, from the poems of In My Old Days.[20]

The critic is wondering "*why, on principle,* ***being thanked*** [emphasis is ours] *might be undesirable. And why some forms of courage might require reticence, silence, renunciation*."[21] Speaking about Penelope Fitzgerald's *The Blue Flower* (1995), Hermione Lee as well emphasizes "*a feeling of strangeness*" and "*estrangement*" the reader is overwhelmed with.[22] This feeling of estrangement pervades almost all her novels. She presents a very intriguing and indeed a very unconventional view of the concept of defamiliarization relating to a wide range of notions like modesty, truth-telling, coping skills, her love of poetry and the ability to encounter all sorts of challenges.

Her second novel *The Bookshop* (1978), containing many parallels with the author's own life is rich in very paradoxical thoughts and ideas. The protagonist of the novel, a childless widow of 58 with a suggestive name Florence Green, after some uncertainty causing her a number of sleepless nights, decides to open the only bookshop in Hardborough, a fictional name standing for the real Southwold in Suffolk. Florence Green is not a woman remarkable for her good looks: "*she was in appearance small, wispy and wiry, somewhat insignificant from the front view, and totally so from the back.*"[23] However, under her "*insignificant*" appearance there is a self-confident woman who thinks that "*To leave a mark of any kind was exhilarating*" (52). Florence is a self-made woman, who has supported herself since "*the age of sixteen*" (7), a loyal friend, a faithful and loyal wife, who "*was very happily married*," though strangely enough, she is of the opinion that "*men and women aren't quite the right people for each other*" (19). After her husband's death, she decides that it is the right time for her to prove that "*she existed in her own right*" (5), thus testing her courage since it is her belief that "*courage and endurance are useless if they are never tested*" (15). Actually, her courage is tested at the very beginning of the novel, when a character called Raven, a marshman and the one in charge of boy scouts, asks her to hold an old horse's tongue while filing its teeth. He is also a church sexton, an occupation which must have endowed him with a strong sense of justice. To him, she is a valiant woman, who has a tendency doing "*unlikely things*" (11) like opening a bookshop in Hardborough where people "*have lost the wish for anything of a rarity*" (12) and are "*unused to discipline*" (43). If Florence is very optimistic about opening the bookshop in the 500-year Old House, which is wet and has a real Poltergeist in it, she has some reservations about the noble nature of human beings: "*She blinded herself, in short, by pretending for a while that human beings are not divided into exterminators and exterminatees, with the former, at any given moment, predominating*" (29).

It does not take much time to see the main exterminator Violet Gamart, the most powerful woman with "*connections and acquaintances*" in Hardborough (72). In fact, the exposition of the novel foreshadows the troubles to come:

> She had once seen a heron flying across the estuary and trying, while it was on the wing, to swallow an eel which it had caught. The eel, in turn, was struggling to escape from the gullet of the heron and appeared a quarter, a half, or

[20] Flower 2005, 583.
[21] Flower 2005, 583.
[22] Lee 2013, 387.
[23] Fitzgerald, 2001, 5. (All the further quotations are to this addition with the page number followed.)

> occasionally three-quarters of the way out. The indecision expressed by both creatures was pitiable. They had taken on too much (5).

The symbols heron and eel gain a wider meaning with the development of the plot and later, when Florence encounters challenges, she becomes aware that she too "had taken on too much."

She is happy to get an invitation to a party "*for the county, and for visitors from London,*" erroneously thinking that Mrs. Gamart invites her to thank her for the bookshop project (17). She takes so much pain to choose a dress for the party. Although Florence is liked by Jessie Welford, the dressmaker and the owner of *Rhoda's Dressmaker's*, "*her confidence was hardly respected*" by Jessie, who "*did not hesitate to speak about it freely*" (14-15). Jessie Welford makes a red dress for her, in which she feels very uncomfortable during the fitting. Florence would not have gone with red if the choice had been left to her. However, she decides "*to stand against the wall most of the time*," in which case, perhaps she will not be noticed in the crowd (15). The dressmaker does not refrain from a condescending remark: "*when you get there, you won't have to bother about how you look. Nobody will mind you*" (16). However, as in some cases, she remains silent in the face of the dressmaker's humiliating attitude.

As the narrator later wisely remarks, "*Green had not been brought up to understand natures*" of such people, nor does she fully understand Milo North: "*It was too difficult for her to believe that he simply lapsed into whatever he did next only if it seemed to him less trouble than anything else*" (55). In the beginning, she is attracted to him, treating him as a friend, but later she gradually sees his flaws and does not hesitate to point them out to him outright. She is outspokenly critical of his character. Relying on her moral judgment, she characterizes him as follows: "*marry Kattie, think less about yourself and work harder*" (61). Milo is a handsome and presentable man, who works for the BBC, has a mistress Kattie whom evidently he is not planning to marry (she finally leaves him). The narrator, while describing Milo, once again appears in her typical role of the defamiliarizer:

> What seemed delicacy in him was usually a way of avoiding trouble before it started. It was hard to see what growing older would mean to such a person. His emotions, from lack of exercise, had disappeared almost altogether (19).

And it comes as no surprise when such a man betrays Florence at the end of the novel, siding with Mrs. Gamart who promises him the position of the head of the Arts Centre, and Milo is not the kind of man to resist temptations. He is one of those who does "*the easiest thing*" (110). It is obvious that she was brought up to love and appreciate beauty, the book being one of its best representations. The great Ralph Waldo Emerson defines beauty in a fascinating way:

> Beauty is the form under which the intellect prefers to study the world. All privilege is that of beauty; for there are many beauties; as, of general nature, of the human faith and form, of manners, of brain, or method, moral beauty, or beauty of the soul.[24]

Florence is indeed a woman in possession of moral beauty and the beauty of the soul who wanted to share her love of books with the residents of Hardborough. But the evil incarnate Mrs. Gamart who wants the Old House for an art centre of her own, and the toadies who support her prevented her from realizing her long-cherished dream. Christopher J. Knight rightly calls her "*corrupt and corrupting; she is also sad and pathetic if one thinks, as Fitzgerald has said elsewhere, that '*[m]*oney, like power, deflects one from the essence of life.'*"[25] And it is here that Florence's courage is tested once again, and she turns Mrs. Gamart's request down,

[24] Emerson 1909, 310.
[25] Knight 2016, 68.

something the latter is not used to at all. Florence Green's keen sense of morality does not let her say a single unkind word to the eleven-year-old Christine Gipping when she unconsciously hurts her by saying "*You look old, but you don't look strong*" (46), and "*You haven't any children, Mrs Green?* […] *Life passes you by in that respect, then*" (47), and even when she treats Mrs. Gamart very rudely giving "*her a good rap over the knuckles*" (65). However, later, Florence becomes aware that "*morality is seldom a safe guide for human conduct*" (89). Unfortunately, this is what turns out to be the case in Hardborough, where even the people she helped and trusted turned their back on her.

Fitzgerald, like Henry James, believes in "*the eternal mystery of things*,"[26] and the vagaries of human mind. In her essay on Jane Austen's *Emma*, she considers Frank Churchill a character causing "*more pain than anyone else in the book;*"[27] "*he has used every body ill*" says Mr. Knightley "*and they are delighted to forgive him. — He is a fortunate man indeed*."[28] Mrs. Gamart of 1950s is even worse than Frank Churchill more than two centuries ago. Unlike Florence, she is not very sure that "*A good book is the precious life-blood of a master spirit, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life*" (33).

Unlike Mrs. Gamart, Florence is very sensitive about books. When Milo advises her to order *Lolita* for selling and promises her a "*fortune*" (55), she is more interested in the book's quality rather than the profit it is likely to bring. She is modest enough to admit that she has not "*been trained to understand the arts*" and "*masterpieces*" (61). Her mind gets confused having read Graham Greene's article highly praising the novel calling it "*a masterpiece*" on the one hand, on the other hand the American papers speaking negatively about it describing it as "*dull, pretentious, florid and repulsive*" (61). Not trusting Milo's opinion about *Lolita*, she decides to turn to Mr. Brundish for advice and sends him a note asking for his assessment of the book. It does not take long to get his invitation to Holt House, where the man, who had supported and encouraged her to open the bookshop, resides. The Holt House is distinctive not only with its only resident Mr. Brundish but also with its atmosphere: "*It was difficult to speak anything other than truth in Holt House*" (72), and it was the only house where Mrs. Gamart was unacknowledged. When Florence, this kind-hearted woman, remarks that Mrs. Gamart perhaps means well, Mr. Brundish immediately disagrees, doubting her good intentions and wondering whether arts can have a centre. As for *Lolita*, Mr. Brundish does not mind selling "*it to the inhabitants of Hardborough. They won't understand it, but that is all the good. Understanding makes the mind lazy*" (72). Like Raven, Mr. Brundish also admires Florence's courage,

> Let me tell you what I admire in human beings. I value most the one virtue which they share with gods and animals, and which need not therefore be referred to as a virtue. I refer to courage. You, Mrs Green, possess that quality in abundance (73).

During their conversation, Florence cannot help thinking that "*Loneliness was speaking to loneliness*" (73). This personification is striking in terms of their characterization in that both of them have left most of their life behind, but they still try to make sense of it. Both of them are kind-hearted and human-hearted, but a kind heart "*is not of much use when it comes to the matter of self-preservation*" (5). Mr. Brundish is well aware of that and is not as optimistic and hopeful as Florence is. The motto written on his silver teapot testifies to it: "*Not to succeed in one thing is to fail in all*" (70). However, this motto does not affect her at all. Before she is taking her leave, she is full of hope: "*'I mustn't let myself worry,' she said. 'While there's life*

[26] **See**: Powers 1959, 143-155.
[27] Fitzgerald 2005, 10.
[28] Austen 1882, 370.

there's hope'" (74). However, Mr. Brundish again keeps surprising the reader by considering hope a terrifying thought. Nevertheless, Mr. Brundish is faithful to her up to his death. When ill and weary, he makes his way to Violet Gamart's place, he is far from keeping appearances blaming Mrs. Gamart for being offensive and wants her to leave his friend Florence alone. But in vain does he expect any positive change in her decision. What he sees on her face is not remorse but impassivity only. After all, it is true that cruelty has no morality.

What follows is really something unprecedented in the worst sense of the word. Without any scruples, Mrs. Gamart distorts Mr. Brundish's pre-death words (Mr. Brundish dies on his way home). Florence learns the distorted truth from Gamart's husband:

> He made a great effort to call on her, it seems, to congratulate her on her idea — her idea, I mean, about this Arts Centre. I'm sorry I didn't manage to get a word with him myself. I must say I shouldn't have thought Art was quite his line of country, but, well, a good man gone (107).

The news inevitably caused her much more pain than her own solicitor Mr. Thornton's betrayal, Milo's double standards, the Private Bill law that Mrs. Gamart's nephew passes in the Parliament, after which Florence felt herself "*a wanted criminal*" (108). After going through the painful period of indifference and betrayal, she leaves Hardborough in silence with a lacerated heart. If her wounds were bleeding, no-one saw it:

> In the winter of 1960, therefore, having sent her heavy luggage on ahead, Florence Green took the bus into Flintmarket via Saxford Tye and Kingsgrove. Wally carried her suitcases to the bus stop. Once again the floods were out, and the fields stood all the way, on both sides of the road, under shining water. At Flintmarket she took the 10.46 to Liverpool Street. As the train drew out of the station she sat with her head bowed in shame, because the town in which she had lived for nearly ten years, had not wanted a bookshop (111).

It is not only Christopher Knight who calls the novel "*a story steeped in sadness, a sadness punctuated by the novels defeat.*"[29] David Nicholls as well emphasizes the unusual ending of the novel: "*The prose is plain and matter-of-fact, and only one word is used to describe Florence's emotion. But it is a terrible word, and the final sentence of this book is one of the saddest I've ever read. Quietly devastating like the novel itself*."[30] This terrible word is *shame*. Florence Green feels guilty that the residents of Hardborough failed to appreciate her efforts and failed to exhibit fondness towards books. The critic Hugh Adlington, the great admirer of Penelope Fitzgerald's personality and her oeuvre, too, finds that "*The ending is as heart-breaking and pessimistic as any in Fitzgerald's writing*."[31]

The novel justifies Florence's belief "*that character was a struggle between good and bad intentions*" (55). Unfortunately, those with bad intentions outnumber those with good ones. Katherine A. Powers comparing Penelope Fitzgerald's life story and her novels states that her life includes a large element of the absurd: "*It is almost impossible not to laugh (hollowly) at the dreadfulness of all this — as if Fitzgerald's own festive pessimism had spawned these disasters*."[32] What the critic calls *absurd*, actually overlaps with the notion of defamiliarization. The novel is undoubtedly sad in that it reveals the dark side of people, how their own interests take over Florence's life changing experience.

[29] Knight 2016, 64-65.
[30] **See**: Fitzgerald 2013.
[31] Adlington 2018, 43.
[32] Powers 2014, n.p.

Daniel P. Gunn, in his article "Making Art Strange: A Commentary on Defamiliarization," points out that "*To produce an effect of defamiliarization, then, an artist must consciously violate the accepted ways of making meanings—whatever they are*." [33] In this sense, Penelope Fitzgerald's defamiliarization is demanding in that she distorts the familiar concepts making them strange and uncanny. It is very puzzling that "*understanding makes the mind lazy*," that hope is "*a terrifying thought*," that Milo considers the phrase "*very kind of you*" to be a mistaken notion, that morality "is seldom a safe conduct," that kind heart "*is not of much use when it comes to the matter of self preservation*," and that "*men and women aren't quite the right people for each other.*" All these paradoxical statements, the unique portrayal of characters, the sad mood of the story increase *the difficulty and length of perception* expressed by Shklovsky.

Florence Green's failure does not define her negatively. On the contrary, it reveals the best personality traits of hers. But the force of circumstances or *the eternal mystery of things* makes it impossible to realize her dream. The tragedy of misunderstanding among people is what Penelope Fitzgerald focuses on in this novel. And it is what makes man's life complex and complicated. To Penelope Fitzgerald, as Katherine A. Powers states "*life's losers are far more interesting than its winners*."[34] Despite all the pessimism in the novel, the pessimism being far from *festive,* there is still hope in the book. This hope is Florence Green herself, a woman who manages the impossible: to be yourself.

[33] Gunn 1984, 30.
[34] Powers 2014, n.p.

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