

**THE RECREATION OF BEAUTY AS REVEALED IN THE  
POSTMODERN NOVEL *BIRDS WITHOUT WINGS* BY LOUIS DE  
BERNIÉRES**

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***ABSTRACT***

*From the times immemorial the concept of beauty fascinated philosophers and artists who tried to define it in their works. Even various mythologies and religions reveal this preoccupation with beauty, emphasizing such criteria as proportion, symmetry, virtue, unity, goodness, or such oppositions as harmony vs. chaos, light vs. darkness etc. The attitude toward beauty, as well as the relationship between divinity and beauty changed considerably with the passage of time. The aim of this study is to reveal how the concept of beauty of the Western canon becomes deconstructed and reconstructed in the postmodern novel *Birds Without Wings* by Louis de Bernières. The novel, which is set in an Ottoman town at the beginning of the twentieth century, reflects the loss of unity and beauty in an apocalyptic world. Initially presented as a paradisiacal space, Eskibahçe loses its harmony, virtue, and proportion, decaying into chaos.*

**Key Words:***beauty, Apollonian, Dionysian, body, harmony.*

**1. INTRODUCTION**

Louis de Bernières' novel *Birds Without Wings* represents the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the birth of the present day Turkey, as well the loss of unity, followed by the exodus of people from the places which they considered their home, and it also reveals the personal relations of people in a small town called Eskibahçe, which symbolically represents



the Garden of Eden in Turkish. In his recreation of history the novelist even entitles an episode as “Fritz and Moritz Accidentally Change History,” and Rustem’s obsession with time and clocks allude to modernity and awareness of time, while it is a means of mockery at the same time. Likewise, ground perceptions on beauty are reflected upon by de Bernières, and a major concern of the novel is the representation of the notion of beauty, which is revised, deconstructed and reconstructed in a postmodern manner.

Louis de Bernières reflects the interrelationship between the personal and the cosmological beauty and harmony in *Birds Without Wings*. Depicting human beings as birds that do not have wings, who try to reach God and the sublime, de Bernières alludes to mythical Icarus who tries to reach the Sun only to lose his wings and to fall and die. Iskander the Potter, who is the first character to narrate the events that fell upon them, makes a comparison between the usefulness of the sun and the moon, and he says “The moon is more important because you need the light more at night than you do during the day when it’s light.” (De Bernières, 2014: 47). He, then, continues his comparison, and claims that a potter is second to God, and explains, “Because God created everything out of earth, air, fire and water, and these are the very same things that a potter uses to make his vessels. When a potter makes something, he acts in the image of God.” (De Bernières, 2014: 47). Additionally, he makes and gives the boys, Abdul and Nico, two musical bird whistles, and the boys begin to be called as Karatavuk (Blackbird) and Mehmetçik (Robin). Then, the Godlike potter, who might represent the light of moon, tells them that ““Man is a bird without wings,””then continues reflecting that ““and a bird is a man without sorrows.”” (De Bernières, 2014: 48). The two boys go around the town making sounds similar to that of birds, and these sounds function as reminders of the desire of human beings to reach God and the angelic position. Echoing the hubris of human beings to become Gods and creators of their own future, the novel is about the birth of new nation state out of an empire.

Louis de Bernières creates peculiar, and yet mostly one dimensional characters in *Birds Without Wings*. These characters are mostly naïve in themselves, and even when they do some evil, it is as if they were innocent but incited by some superior powers. For instance, when Levon the Sly is beaten and kicked by a drunken man in the town centre, there is a crowd cheering the man beating Levon. De Bernières describes their madness ““Kick him, kick him!” cried the women, like an intoxicated chorus of maenads.” (2014: 161). They are mostly innocent people, they are tempted and driven insane by the circumstances. The novel, which is mostly preoccupied with the reflection of beauty through harmony and order, reveals symbolically the confrontation between Apollonian beauty and the chaotic nature of Dionysian beauty. Dylan Nealis comments on Nietzsche’s points on Apollonian and Dionysian beauty and believes that

[E]very artist, often unconsciously, exhibits a stylistic and thematic tendency toward one inclination or the other. Whereas Apollonian artists are largely bent on producing symmetrically “understandable and beautiful world[s]” (Preminger 41), the poet in whom the Dionysian impulse is dominant thrives in absolute physicality, searching out the “blind irrationality, pain, and suffering in the world which gives rise to Dionysian dance of orgiastic worship. (2012: 54)

Louis de Bernières reflects the influence of Dionysian and Apollonian beauty. If initially the town of Eskibahçe is dominated by Apollonian beauty, reason and harmony, a



fact seen in friendly tendencies of human personalities, later the edenic space transforms under the impact of Dionysian beauty, reflected again in frenzy and excess of the people's acts.

De Bernières deconstructs the criteria considered essential in the historical construction of beauty. In various ages beauty was analysed in relation to such criteria as goodness, light, virtue, truth, mathematics, symmetry, harmony, and divinity, as it was deprived of a discourse of its own until very recently. The criteria to assess beauty were inspired by various mythologies, religions, philosophers, and writers. Umberto Eco writes about beauty and says that "over the centuries it was artists, poets and novelists who told us about the things they considered beautiful, and they were the ones who left us examples." (2004: 12). Therefore, in the analysis of beauty in the Western canon, in this paper references to artists, as well as those of the philosophers will be provided. The aim of our study is to juxtapose the mythological beauty and Biblical beauty with some postmodern beauty notions as they are reflected in the representation of some characters of Louis de Bernières' novel, and to eventually disclose the ways in which beauty is reflected in the postmodern context in a work of literature.

## **2. THE DECONSTRUCTION OF MYTHOLOGICAL BEAUTY**

The first thing, considered by de Bernières in his novel is about beauty in its correlation with harmony. The first narrator of the novel is Iskander the Potter, who starts the novel in a nostalgic and melancholic way. Echoing the beauty standards of Ancient Greece and that of Apollo and Dionysus, Iskander's prologue begins with the explanation of Ibrahim's insanity. The first thing to be captured here is the Dionysian beauty, which conveys "possession and madness." (Eco, 2004: 58). De Bernières' narrator suggests that Ibrahim went mad because he was deeply affected by the war that destroyed the unity between different races that were living harmoniously in Eskibahçe, and consequently he lost his beloved Philothei as a result of apparently an accidental murder. Once he returns from war, he cannot recover and resume to his old self. Eventually he fails to marry his bride, Philothei, and she is torn between her duties as a daughter and as a fiancée. She is a Christian Greek who is supposed to be a Muslim once she marries Ibrahim. However, as the union fails between the couple, she is torn between staying with Ibrahim and joining the exodus with her family. Iskander recounts her as "in retrospect none of it seems believable, and it cannot matter much if finally I tell of the last misfortune that fell upon Philothei, sweet-natured, Christian, vain and beautiful." (De Bernières, 2014: 1). It is noteworthy that Iskander mentions them both in the same paragraph: Philothei's beauty and Ibrahim's madness.

The relation between Ibrahim and Philothei echoes the correlation between Apollonian and Dionysian beauty. Erman Kaplama says that "the Apollonian is the formative force in ancient Greek tragedy that represents the beautiful appearance and the measured restraint with its ability to avert self-destruction caused by the boundless attraction of the Dionysian." (2016: 180). As Iskander reflects it, the people remaining in Eskibahçe have lost their unity, and he says "We are in any case a serious people here. Life was merrier when the Christians were still among us, not least because almost every one of their days was the feast of some saint." (De Bernières, 2014: 1). Iskander is melancholic, and he relates his melancholy to his religion and says, "Our religion makes us grave and thoughtful, dignified and melancholy, whereas theirs did not exact much discipline." (De Bernières, 2014: 1). The loss of mirth is often related to Ibrahim and Philothei, as Ibrahim lost his merriness, and Iskander says that



“there is a sadness seeping out the stones of this half-deserted town.” (De Bernières, 2014: 2). Following this sentence, Iskander returns to Ibrahim and mentions how entertaining and joyous he was before. Christians were once a part of their life, and when Christians were forced to depart, the remaining people of the town were Muslims, and both Christians and Muslims lose their unity and harmony, and none of them ever feel complete again. Iskander feels as if he is living in an apocalyptic world in which they have forgotten to die in time.

Louis de Bernières represents the loss of harmony through a violent act. The breakdown of harmony is reflected through the exposure and stoning of a beautiful woman. She is suspected of having committed adultery, yet there is not enough evidence to support the claim. De Bernières portrays the characters that threw stones at Tamara as initially starting involuntarily. In the beginning, they did not want to do it, but once they started it, they could not help themselves. When there were not enough stones to throw, they started kicking and spitting on her. When Ayse examines Tamara, she notices that those who kicked her usually preferred to kick her in the genitals. The stoning of the beautiful woman is another hint of loss of harmony. Therefore, loss of beauty, punishing the beautiful, as well as the lack of evidence suggests that the correlation between goodness, order, and harmony has been lost within the local community.

Another Apollonian and Dionysian nature of beauty is represented through the characters of Drosoula and Philothei. As Eco comments, Apollonian beauty is understood as serene harmony, measure and order while Dionysian beauty is to be understood as “a joyous and dangerous Beauty, antithetical to reason and often depicted as possession and madness” (2004: 58). This dualistic nature of beauty is reconstructed or deconstructed in postmodern literature. Beauty is handled in comparison to ugliness, and they can even coexist within the same body. It is necessary to have ugliness in order for beauty to arise. If it were not for ugliness, it would be harder to detect beauty. It is a ground which makes it easier to compare. This dualistic nature proves the existence of beauty. In de Bernières’ text, beauty has a dualistic nature and it gains its power when it is compared to its opposite aspect: ugliness. Philothei and Drosoula are like the two sides of a coin who can never be separated. Drosoula considers that she is the personification of ugliness, whereas her friend Philothei is the beauty of the town. They are always together since their childhood. When Leyla sees Philothei for the first time, she wants to have her as a maid not for reasons of housework, but because Philothei will accompany her with her beauty. Leyla says that she wants to have the pretty one, not the ugly one, since she wants to be surrounded by prettiness. Rustem responds to it as “The ugly one and the pretty one are always together. I have been wondering if they are sisters.” (De Bernières, 2014: 200). In this part, one can see the reconstruction of beauty as in the temple of Apollo and Dionysus in order to represent the coexistence of beauty and ugliness.

Eco comments on the Pythagorean beauty about opposites, and he says: “when two opposites are in contrast to each other, only one of them represents perfection: the odd number, the straight line and the square are good and beautiful, the elements placed in opposition to them represent error, evil, and disharmony.” (2004: 72). Apollonian and Dionysian beauty is given in opposition, and Pythagorean beauty has an opposition. However, in de Bernières’ novel, they all unite and create a harmony out of disharmony. The two girls perform the union of opposites and thus create perfection.



### 3. THE PHILOSOPHERS ON BEAUTY

It was Pythagoras who introduced the famous concept of golden mean to measure beauty. According to Pythagoras, beauty was to be analysed in relation to mathematics and numbers. In this respect, Robert P. Mills states that “Pythagoras and his followers noted that objects proportioned according to the so-called ‘golden mean’ seemed more beautiful than those that were not.” (2009: 3). They had some mathematical measures for beauty and the beauty of a body could be measured with those measures. We still use numbers to define whether a person is beautiful or not. Symmetry can also be measured in this sense and Robert P. Mills comments on this idea and says that “people whose facial features are symmetric and proportioned according to the golden mean are consistently ranked as more attractive than those whose faces are not.” (2009: 3). Therefore, it could be said that Pythagoras introduced the use of numbers in order to define what is beautiful. His theory on beauty is objective as it is based on the golden mean principle to measure beauty.

Beauty could be measured, and for something to be considered as beautiful, it had to have proportion. De Bernières had already deconstructed proportion and symmetry in *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, presenting it as reversion. In *Birds Without Wings*, he reconstructs it and this time it is represented in line with Pythagoras' concept. However, he is skeptical of symmetry, and he mocks it in two different contexts. The first one is when Rustem wants to buy Leyla from Kardelen. Kardelen describes Leyla as “she is the ideal of beauty. Her face is slightly oval, her skin is very fine and white, her eyebrows are black and meet in the middle, her lips are very red and fresh. She is neither tall nor squat.” (De Bernières, 2014: 186). Kardelen refers to her face's symmetry and her body's proportion; however, as the reader knows that Leyla will be bought like a possession and she will not be a wife, her body's proportion and symmetry serve only to please Rustem, and therefore Leyla's body is treated like an object.

Tamara is also subject to symmetry and proportion. Although Rustem has never seen her fully naked, the women in the hamam have seen her, and Ayse describes her body as “small and slight, but her breasts were round like pomegranates, and any mother in the hamam would have wished her as a wife for the pleasure of a son” (De Bernières, 2014: 115). Another reference to proportion and symmetry is made when Tamara is treated by Ayse. Some of her bones are broken when she is stoned, and there is a break in her collarbone too. Ayse says that “If you don't set it right in a woman then she's got one breast higher than the other till she's lying in the grave and even after...I am glad to say, and she heals up nice and square, within reason.” (De Bernières, 2014: 115). Similar to Leyla's example, one can see that symmetry and proportion are to please men, and once Tamara heals, she will be sent to live in sanctuary in a brothel as a prostitute. Therefore, it would not be wrong to suggest that de Bernières is sarcastic about symmetry and proportion, and the use of mathematics in assessing beauty, since it always ends in serving or pleasing someone.

While Aristotle is in line with Pythagoras about the objectivity and measurability of beauty, Plato is different from them, in that he relates beauty to the divine. Plato thinks that beauty exists within the object. Plato's concept of beauty is different from that of Pythagoras and he defines beauty in relation to forms. For him, literature and any forms of art are to be dismissed because they deter us from understanding reality. What we have in art is just a copy of the original form. Plato disregards the copies. However, as Robert P. Mills says, Plato's concept of beauty resides in his belief that beauty is “something that exists within the



object” (2009: 3). De Bernières reflects this in Philothei, and her birth is given in a magical realist way. She was beautiful even as a baby. All those that visit her, be them Muslim or Christian, speculate about her beauty, and yet they are all fearful of her beauty. They feel that some evil might fall upon her, simply because of her beauty. Philothei’s father, Abdulhamid hoca, and Drosoula’s father are fearful of her beauty, as Drosoula remembers her father saying, “When I saw her eyes I was afraid of God for the first time in my life. It was as if they belonged to someone who had lived too long and seen too much. They were an angel’s eyes, and they made me think of death.” (De Bernières, 2014: 21). Her angelic and divine beauty makes everyone around her to think of death. De Bernières reverses the good connotations of beauty to death to the destructive nature of Dionysian beauty. The night Philothei was born is given in Apollonian nature in that it is a calm night, the bulbuls are singing, and there is order, yet it is a difficult birth, and since men are afraid, it reminds one of the Dionysian nature of uncontrollable beauty.

Plato’s denial of copies is reflected by de Bernières through the characters of Leyla and Philothei. Philotheirepresents a simulation; a copy. Plato’s concept of copy regains power in Baudrillard’s theory on simulations and simulacra. As Plato suggests, the copies and art distance one far from truth, Baudrillard takes a step further and claims that they hide the fact that they are not original, and the next step is when they cover the fact that there is no original behind them. Baudrillard says that there are four stages of simulation and simulacra. He describes them as first “it is the reflection of a profound reality”, here we might have a copy of an original like a painting, this is the first stage; and the second stage is “it masks and denatures a profound reality”, here one might think of an icon of God as Baudrillard states it; and the third stage is when “it masks the absence of a profound reality”, like in the case of Disneyland, and on the final stage “it has no relation to any reality whatsoever: it is its own simulacrum.” (1994: 6). In this respect Philothei is a copy just like Leyla. De Bernières reverses the roles, and once Rustem goes to get a beautiful mistress to make him happy, he is disgusted by the environment where Leyla lives, and “He gave thanks to God that it had not been his destiny to live in such a hell of desperation, filth and iniquity, but it did not yet strike him as paradoxical that he had come here in order to seek his happiness.” (De Bernières, 2014: 177). As the reader knows that Leyla creates him a paradise through sexuality and beauty, copies and originals are reversed in an ironic way by de Bernières. The copies are too distant from truth and divine; it is only in Rustem’s case they allude to divinity. Nevertheless, we are aware that the copy only distances Rustem from divinity.

#### **4. BEAUTY IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE**

In the Middle Ages, beauty keeps being correlated to divinity. Beauty is regarded as a bestowment, yet the reader knows that it is not the case in the novel. The beautiful Philothei ends up dead. Tamara is stoned and forced to live in a brothel. Leyla has to take upon another role, race, name, and she is a mistress instead of a wife. The only ugly character of the novel, Drosoula, gets married in time, she is loved by her husband, and she survives in the end.

In the same period, there is considered to be three transcendental features of divinity: beauty, goodness, and truth. Umberto Eco says that “what is beautiful is the same as what is good, and in fact in various historical periods there was a close link between the Beautiful and the Good.” (2004: 9). However, in the novel the correlation between them is reversed. Ugly Drosoula is honest and protective. Philothei is vain and beautiful, but she is no more than



that. Leyla is beautiful but she has to be a liar. She tells lies about her race, her name, and her virginity. Because of the apocalyptic nature of the novel, copies and lies triumph over truth and originality. The divine nature and relation between beauty, goodness, and truth is reversed when Rustem takes Leyla as his mistress. He wants to erect a temple if he receives a good mistress, but when he arrives home, “He has had another one of his disturbing dreams about witnessing the funeral of God, except that this time the angels are dumb, and the coffin is so minute that it would scarcely hold a babe.” (De Bernières, 2014: 200). Therefore, it would not be wrong to suggest that the divine aspect of beauty is reversed here, since Leyla’s beauty does not compensate for the loss of connection between God and human beings. God is transformed into a baby, into a needy baby whose helpers, namely angels, cannot hear anything. Human beings are left in a world where God cannot help them anymore. Baudrillard says that “There have always been churches to hide the death of God, or to hide the fact that God was everywhere, which amounts to the same thing.” (1993: 19).

A medieval and Renaissance characteristic to be deconstructed by de Bernières is the beauty of monsters. Monsters and ugly creatures were used to create memorable places according to Umberto Eco, and he says that “monsters had a friendly function, precisely because of their impressive ugliness.” (2011: 125). He keeps on explaining why they were useful and says, “in the *arts of memory*, since ancient times, those wishing to be able to recall words and concepts were advised to associate them with various rooms in a building or various places in a city where there stood horrifying statues that were hard to forget.” (2011: 125). Therefore, it could be beneficial to take into consideration that Drosoula usually refers to her memory. De Bernières might have recreated ugliness and monstrosity to allude to this function of memorability. Drosoula says that “I am just an old woman in exile, I have no education, I am ugliness personified, but if I could break open my ribs with my bare hands, I would show you that I have a heart grown huge with love, and grief, and memory.” (De Bernières, 2014: 25). The act that she describes is a bit brutal, but she is memorable and she tries to break the link between ugliness and not being good. She also makes references to having lost some of her memories, and there are so many times that, when she refers to Philothei and Leyla’s beauty and her own ugliness, she refers to memory too.

Another feature of beauty in the Middle Ages is that of being beautified, as ornamentation starts to be used, and in the postmodern context this leads people to turn themselves into commodities. In the novel, it is usually the prostitutes whose eyes have heavy kohl, and Leyla prefers to use ornaments to beautify herself and Philothei. What Leyla buys is ironically given by de Bernières as “they shop for fabrics, for draughts and potions, cosmetics and liniments and lotions, for things that she insists she must have, and most of which he has never heard.” (2014: 194). Rustem, who wants to be a modern man, is doomed to live with a woman who is not like his wife Tamara, who refused any ornamentation. In order to beautify herself, Leyla uses the things that Rustem bought for her in order to seduce him, like the gold string, which he bought for her forehead.

## 5. MYTHOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL BEAUTY

Beauty as light has been a subject to explore not only in mythological Apollonian discourse but also in Biblical discourse. De Bernières reflects characters glowing with light. Nevertheless, in addition to the reflection of light through the body and beauty of characters, de Bernières uses light and darkness to set a background for beauty, morality, and decay. When Philothei’s birth is announced, Iskander comments, “I swear that the whole night was



changed. The dogs ceased to howl, the moon broke out from behind the clouds, there was a scent of saffron and olibanum in the air, and a bulbul began to sing in the plane tree down in the centre of meydan” (De Bernières, 2014: 9). That is the first case where light and beauty coexist to set a background. Although the scene evokes pleasant feelings, de Bernières uses this scene for opposite purposes, since the characters do not only feel happy in this transcendental scene, but they also feel frightened, because they suspect that something bad might happen in this pleasant atmosphere.

As we have claimed earlier, for de Bernières, “Light and darkness are combined to suggest ambiguity over the correlation of virtue, goodness and light.” (Akkaş, 2016: 128). When Leyla creates a paradise for Rustem over lights, food, and beauty, de Bernières reflects moral deterioration in this paradise through light and pleasant atmosphere. Leyla gets prepared for the seduction of Rustem Bey, and her body and beauty are displayed as, “Her black hair was superbly brushed and shining, and her eyes seemed huge and infinitely dark. They glittered in the half-light. Across her forehead glowed the string of gold chains” (De Bernières, 2014: 228). Leyla has inner light, and through shining objects and a suitable background, she manages to be more beautiful. However, since Leyla is not Rustem’s wife, the sexual relation between Leyla and Rustem, for which she has been preparing, suggests adultery, the same reason he got his wife stoned. Leyla plays with light and darkness to create him a false paradise. Similar to the lure of Odysseus and his men, Rustem falls into Leyla’s paradise for a long time, the paradise Leyla created through beauty, sexuality, food, music, and light.

De Bernières relates beauty to light as one reads Rustem’s comments on Leyla’s beauty and light. The first thing that he says is about moonlight, and then its making it possible to see in the darkness. Then he says that Leyla is beautiful, like the night. When there is a reference to light and darkness, there is a reference to beauty too. Once he gets into the room he questions whether he is in paradise because “The inner court was a sea of glimmering, moving golden-yellow lights. There was no pattern to it. Some of the flames were momentarily still, and others were travelling” (De Bernières, 2014: 229). It brings to mind the chaotic nature of Dionysian beauty. De Bernières recreates Dionysian beauty in that sense. The lines following the still and moving lights reflect the downfall and moral deterioration in a sarcastic way: “It was as if the stars had been captured from Heaven and been set in motion there in that small square of the lower world.” (De Bernières, 2014: 218). Although Rustem feels as if it were paradise, we know that it is the very opposite of it.

The transcendental nature of light and beauty continues when Rustem mentions the pleasantness of the night for him. ““All my life, hanım,’ he said, ‘all of it that is granted to remain, I shall remember this night, this feast, these pretty lights, you, your great beauty. What’s better, after this? After this, there is only death.’” (De Bernières, 2014: 231). For Rustem, beauty and sexuality are transcendental and sublime. It reminds him of death. Beauty and lights are used in this postmodern context to represent the fall of humankind from heaven in Biblical manner rather than to imply transcendence.

As opposed to Leyla, the background when Rustem loses Tamara and her new place to live is represented in darkness. Rustem awaits Tamara to be saved by Abdulhamid in order to be cared for after she is stoned. Rustem returns to his house to find it in darkness. When Ayse takes Tamara to the brothel, the road is described as, “beyond to where the street turned a corner sharply and ended with a final, isolated house, flat-roofed, whose façade was draped





with climbing roses, and whose windows were latticed in order to conceal the dark interior.” (De Bernières, 2014: 125). It does not only reflect Tamara’s fall into darkness, but also universally speaking the world’s fall into darkness, as soon after the incident a war is to break out.

When Rustem wants to visit Tamara in the brothel, de Bernières describes the road to the brothel and the interior of the brothel in relation to light and darkness. “He was wrapped so heavily in a black cloak as to be almost invisible, and it was obvious that he was being deliberately furtive. He stood still for a while, accustoming his eyes to the darkness, and then he set off.” (De Bernières, 2014: 411-412). Once again, physical darkness is related to deterioration, since this secret act is not based on just benefic intention of helping Tamara, but on his desire to have sex with her one more time. “Even in that darkness, it was clear that he knew where he was going, and there was something in his manner that betrayed great purpose.” (De Bernières, 2014: 412). On his way, he crosses through all the unities of their society, that is to say Muslims’, Christians’, Jews’ and Armenians’ houses. All the religious buildings are described in their good affiliations by de Bernières, maybe to evoke that Rustem is going past them, and he is losing all the religious connections right at that moment. What is striking is that when he gets closer to the brothel, de Bernières uses the same lines that he had used when describing Tamara’s being taken to the brothel on page 125. It might be a reference to the similarity between Tamara’s and Rustem’s downfall.

Inside the brothel, Rustem “found the dark pink light almost too dim, even though he had just come in out of utter darkness.” (De Bernières, 2014: 412). The fall is again represented in relation to darkness, and when Rustem wants to see Tamara’s face, she objects to it saying, “Why do you think we keep the light so dim? If you look at me you will see the diseases, and you will see that I am under a curse” (De Bernières, 2014: 421). There are so many references to darkness and light that even in the brothel through Tamara; she is not a bad person, and it is ironical that darkness represents decay. She does not try to please men; she does not seduce. She wants Rustem to take Leyla as a wife; she does not want Leyla to be disregarded by the people in the town, as she knows what it means to be disregarded. Yet, “Because of her decaying beauty, Tamara prefers to sit in darkness which also accounts for moral deterioration.” (Akkaş, 2016: 128). Tamara is not disobedient to her fate. She has lived through it, and she patiently awaits her death, and she does not push it as the other women do in the brothel by drugs, either to die or to relieve their pain. Tamara believes that this world is governed by the devil. She cannot cleanse the earth through her tears; she knows that she cannot because she has cried enough. If she had the chance, she would buy the world from the devil with her tears if they were worth anything.

There are many Biblical references to beauty and the body in the novel. Although beauty is not a direct concern of religion, it is mostly affiliated with God and virtue. In the novel, the body of believers consists not only of the Christians, but also of Muslims and of Jews. Tatiana Golban reflects this unity as,

The mixture of spiritual and cultural strands does not spoil at all the harmonious universe of Eskibahçe. This “unity in diversity” in fact strengthens the atmosphere of the initial paradisiacal space of Eskibahçe, which is also suggested through the beauty of nature, of the village, of Abdulhamid Hoca’s horse, of Philothei, of people, a



beauty which is almost unearthly. The metaphor of the Edenic space is also sustained by the beauty of the church and the mosque.(2015: 46).

The believers of these religions pray for the other religions secretly, and the lines between these religions are blurred, and it is easy to cross between religions by marriage. As the name of the town, Eskibahçe, Garden of Eden suggests, they live in paradise. Golban refers to this as, “The novel begins with the depiction of an Edenic space, where most of the characters live in harmony and relative respect for each other.” (2015: 46). However, their local troubles intervene with the global troubles, and their saviour figure fails to save them. Rustem fails to protect his bride, and she is cast away to a brothel. He wants to build a temple for God if he finds a good woman, and he actually finds one, but he fails to build the mosque that he promised to God. Another failure of him is about Levon’s daughters. Rustem saves them from being raped, and he says that he will find them good husbands while their family is being deported, yet once again he fails to protect them, and they become his mistresses, like Leyla.

The most important Biblical reference in the novel is about Madonna/whore dichotomy. The first thing to be noticed about the dichotomy is that they are inverted. Golban refers to the inversion of the Bride, and how Tamara Hanım has lost her significance whom Rustem “feverishly expected to open the gates to heaven for him, Tamara Hanım, becomes ironically the Whore of Babylon, as she destroys the faithful and the committed man through her adultery; unwittingly she triggers violence and releases the forces of evil.” (2015: 49). The bride and whore are reflected as upside down in this postmodern novel. Rustem explains the situation as “‘I have a wife,’ said Rustem, ‘but I have put her aside. She was a slut.’ ‘My aga, a good slut is not to be sniffed at,’ said Kardelen” (De Bernières, 2014: 182). The dichotomy is upside down, yet sarcastically sluts are shown as precious in this part, but Tamara is not a good slut. The men visiting her felt like “You came out disconcerted by those liquid, unfocused eyes that gleamed in the dark, and infected by her loneliness and stillness, and it made you nostalgic and sorrow-shot. There had been, it turned out, little satisfaction in using the wife of the landlord.” (De Bernières, 2014: 133). Kardelen keeps on comparing wives and mistresses and says, “A wife is a cross between a slave and a brood mare, but a mistress is the smell of the rose that comes in through the shutters on a summer night. Think of her as semi-divine.” (De Bernières, 2014: 192). The dichotomy of Madonna/whore is once again played with, and de Bernières makes Kardelen subvert the roles and attributions.

One can also see the difference between soul and the body in Tamara in that although there were queues for her, her body was “motionless, unresponsive flesh” (De Bernières, 2014: 133). While her soul is not to be grasped, and her body is not to give pleasure, she is cast away by other women, who do not want to be associated with harlotry. One can see the unification of the wife and slut when they sit together in the hamam. Both of them are not welcome by the rest of the society, and they unite in their opposition, and they could be said to respect and care for each other.

Another reference to Bible is about the exposure and stoning of Tamara. People start stoning her, and once again like Rustem, it is another Muslim character who takes upon the role of Jesus. Abdulhamid, the imam of the Muslim religion, intervenes and protects Tamara. Abdulhamid’s name also connotes one of the last Ottoman kings and Abdulhamid, who tries hard to deter his empire from falling apart, but in the end it does even though he pays efforts to unite his empire. Abdulhamid, the imam, reminds the Christians about Jesus saving a



stoned woman, and recites from Quran in order to unite them in harmony and peace, rather than evil. The religions coincide about their references to harlotry and stoning. However, de Bernières ironically makes harlotry seem like an illness for the naïve people of the town. The women do not want to touch Tamara, and Ayse says that harlotry is contagious.

## 6. TOWARDS A SUBJECTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF BEAUTY

Beauty notions of various historical eras as well as Biblical beauty are deconstructed by de Bernières in the novel. Earlier beauty notions were about beauty being in correlation with other attributes and being measurable, yet Kant introduces the subjectivity of beauty, and de Bernières reconstructs it in the novel through representation of Philothei. Kant suggests that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. De Bernières presents Philothei through different points of view, and most of the characters agree that she was born beautiful; but for Iskander she was just a baby, like all the other babies, and she was not particularly different. Mehmet Atalay comments on Kant and says that “Kant thinks that the transcendental principle of general acceptability is this principle that provides the *a priori* character of taste. Such a principle, he claims, can only be common sense—*sensus communis*.” (2007: 46). Iskander does not claim that she was ugly; he only says that she was not different as a baby. However, when she grows up, he remembers her as a beautiful girl. Therefore, we could assume that de Bernières recreates Kant’s subjective beauty with universal validity.

Likewise, when Mehmetçik and Karatavuk are playing, they talk about a bunch of topics, and Karatavuk comments on something that he heard, and he says, “‘Everybody says that your sister Philothei is very beautiful,’ (. . .) ‘but I haven’t noticed myself.’” (De Bernières, 2014: 43). Although he does not suggest that Philothei is not beautiful, it is about people’s perceptions of beauty, and he did not notice Philothei’s beauty by himself, yet he acknowledges that she is beautiful. Her beauty exists in herself, and beauty is subjective, but it has universal validity. The subjectivity of beauty is reconstructed in this sense by de Bernières.

## 7. BEAUTY IN THE POSTMODERN ERA

Naomi Wolf says that until 1830s, the image of beauty was represented by the prostitutes, regardless of the benefic and divine attributions added to it. Beauty was advertised through prostitutes. In the novel this statement is reflected as assertion of beauty by Leyla. Although Tamara was beautiful too, it was only through Leyla that Rustem came to appreciate beauty, and once he sees her naked, “He suddenly realised, with a sense of profound wonder, that he had never appreciated before how beautiful a woman was, and how strange and unlike anything else this beauty was.” (De Bernières, 2014: 185). Leyla is created by de Bernières to be the embodiment of beauty. Apart from the moment when Tamara’s being healed, no other woman, except Leyla, is reflected naked. In the hamam, the women get naked, and yet their nakedness is not accessible to men, even though Rustem remembers how curious they were as children to see inside it.

In recent discourse, according to Naomi Wolf, beauty became a kind of a cult for women, and it consequently started to gain negative attributes. Women are left in a dilemma of being beautiful, besides being considered self-centered. Whenever de Bernières mentions Philothei’s beauty, she is also reflected as vain. Drosoula mentions her as, “she wasn’t intelligent or funny or particularly interesting. She didn’t have any knowledge or education. She didn’t really have high spirits. She had two ambitions. One was to be beautiful, and the



other was to marry Ibrahim.” (De Bernières, 2014: 555). One can see the superficiality of Philothei, and Drosoula keeps on commenting on her as, “In lots of ways Philothei was nobody at all and she only lived in a very little world, and she was destined to be ordinary.” (De Bernières, 2014: 555). Although Drosoula makes positive comments on Philothei most of the time, she makes it clear here that Philothei was only obsessed with pretty things and being pretty.

Beauty is like an addiction according to recent theories, and Baudrillard comments on it as, “For women, beauty has become an absolute, religious imperative. Being beautiful is no longer an effect of nature or a supplement to moral qualities. It is the basic, imperative quality of those who take care of their faces and figures as they do of their souls.” (1998: 133). Likewise, one can see the rituals that Philothei and Leyla go through to get more and more beautiful. Leyla defines her addiction to beauty as, “it’s like opium, it’s an addiction, you’ve got to have more and more of it, and it’s like a great heat in the heart that expands and expands and fills you up—like having a sun inside. I just want to get more and more and more beautiful all the time.” (De Bernières, 2014: 219). Leyla has become the slave of beauty in her own words, and it brings forth beauty anxiety. Drosoula is cast away from the beauty rituals practiced by Leyla and Philothei, who go to hamam, wear perfume, and look at the mirror intoxicatingly and they are themselves intoxicated in their own beauty. Drosoula only looks at her reflection in the water to see that she is not like Philothei and Leyla.

As theorists have asserted, beauty brings forth its own negative aspect. Leyla comments on the negative sides of beauty, and she says that beautiful people cannot be sure whether the people around them like them for their beauty or personality, and she says that “Sometimes you wonder why people are being nice to you, and sometimes you know that your beauty is the reason that some people want to be horrible to you. People think that they want to know you, but really they are fascinated by a mask.” (De Bernières, 2014: 218). She likes being beautiful, but she is also aware of the dangers of her beauty too. In this respect Samantha Kwan and Mary Nell Trautner suggest that “individuals expect attractive women to be more conceited and likely to engage in adultery.” (2009: 51). We could deduct that people believed in Tamara’s adultery because they thought that she was beautiful. Likewise, Leyla, who is beautiful as well, is to be suspected of adultery if she does not follow the code of the society. It means that your appearance matters, not only through good connotations, but also through the expectations of seduction and adultery in the contemporary context. People are impressed by your looks more than your personality.

More than once Leyla regards beauty as a job, and she says that she has worked hard in order to be able to be lazy. She admits that “being beautiful is like having a job . . . If you’re a woman you can be a mother or a servant or something, but you can also be beautiful. If you’re beautiful it’s better than working, even if you have to work at it” (De Bernières, 2014: 217). Regarding the processes that beauty has gone since the Industrial Revolution, women, especially working women have been put under the pressure of being beautiful. It is not only about selling beauty products, but also about keeping them under control.

Unlike her previous self, when the war breaks out, Leyla starts to lose her beauty, and she has to do some housework at home, since even though Rustem is rich, they cannot find enough servants. Leyla starts losing her beauty, and she starts to gather wild greens like other women. “Sometimes she looked at the dried skin of her hands, with their ingrained dirt and scuffed nails, and even felt a little proud of herself. She no longer had that enjoyable but



nonetheless guilty sense of wasting her life on frippery and idleness” (De Bernières, 2014: 411). Her loss of beauty and also the idea of being useful makes her spirits higher.

Although Leyla is very beautiful, she says that she is not, and she makes the girls believe it. Together with Philothei they try to beautify each other. This is a bit similar to the alterations done to the bodies of the models in photography. The bodies of even very beautiful women are subject to change in the contemporary world. Women are subject to a beauty discourse to which even the originals themselves do not match. Ironically, in the novel Leyla and Philothei make use of the magic touch of modern cameras through the mirror scene. They multiply their beauty by looking at the mirror as two beautiful women. Therefore, bodily alterations of the postmodern era could be said to be deconstructed and recreated through mirror and magical realism by de Bernières.

In the feminist discourse, beauty is considered to be a construct and it is constructed by men’s institutions in order to control women. Naomi Wolf tries to define what constitutes the beauty myth and says that it “is actually composed of emotional distance, politics, finance, and sexual repression. The beauty myth is not about women at all. It is about men’s institutions and institutional power.” (2002: 13). The construction of beauty as goodness, virtue and justness mostly apply to women. Tamara questions the validity of the discourse, and although she is a beautiful woman, beauty is not for her own sake and she becomes a fetish object for the people in the town in relation to her husband’s rank rather than in relation to her own beauty. She questions the notion of adultery, and she asks Rustem whether the people would stone him if he were the one who had committed adultery. “You would never be stoned. You are not a wife as I was. You are not a young woman who is easy to stone. You are a lion and the rabble are like little dogs. If you roared, they would run away.” (De Bernières, 2014: 418). She criticises the inequality between men and women. When Rustem says that he sometimes imagines having sex with her when he is with Leyla, Tamara accuses him of infidelity, yet she mentions the society’s hypocrisy about it.

The last thing to be pondered upon in this paper is the fragmentary nature of the body and beauty in the postmodern context. The body is split between connotations of sexuality or innocence. Feminine sexuality was not acceptable for a long time, and it is still not acceptable in some societies. The only character who is welcome to perform sexuality is Leyla, yet Rustem questions her virginity when he buys her. He wants to have a pleasing woman who could give him pleasure and who would not be like rigid Tamara. Kardelen says that she taught Leyla the techniques of pleasing men, but Leyla has had no direct experience. It is only on theoretical level. The hypocrisy of the society is to be deceived by Kardelen, as they want to be pleased by experienced women, but they do not want the women to have practiced it.

There are two ends of female beauty and sexuality. As the sexuality of women is feared in the male dominated societies, when women affirm their freedom in their sexual lives, they become pressured. Patrizia Gentile comments on female sexuality and its being constructed and says that there are two edges of female sexuality, either innocent “or something dangerous, unpredictable, and therefore to be feared. In this whore/Madonna paradox, the social and cultural anxieties attributed to female sexuality are often played out on the bodies of girls and young women.” (2007: 1). Now that feminine sexuality and its relation to beauty and the body is a construct in itself, its representation in postmodern literature is reconstructed and deconstructed.



Philothei is the embodiment of innocence and she represents the future bride figure of Eskibahçe. Nevertheless, Louis de Bernières reverses the correlation between innocence and the bridal figure by making the mistress initiates her into the secrets of being a good wife. Her mentor is not the best example in that. As Tatiana Golban comments on de Bernières and says that de Bernières “in a typically postmodern manner, achieves a playful undermining of the conventional, modern Western ideological patterns, constantly engaging the reader into the creation of new ideas and possibly new meanings.” (2014: 11). It would be right to claim that de Bernières makes the reader question the validity of the discourse on beauty, and beauty’s constructed affiliations through ages.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Louis de Bernières’ retrospective novel covers the years around WWI. As a historiographic metafiction, it alludes to some particular historical events which are recreated by de Bernières in *Birds Without Wings*. While the discourse on the female body during those years does not directly correspond to the ideas of this paper, as a postmodern and contemporary writer, who is well aware of how the body and beauty developed within the Western canon, de Bernières reconstructs or deconstructs these ideas in his text. Even though the women in the novel are not exposed to the beauty standards of our time, de Bernières represents some of the characters as being exposed to this discourse by creating Madonna/whore dichotomy, innocent versus decaying beauty, beauty anxiety, through the depictions of characters of Drosoula, Philothei and Leyla, simulation of beauty through commodities and he eventually turns beauty into a kind of commodity and a sign via production. De Bernières reflects the postmodern and contemporary body and beauty ideals of the Western canon on Western and Eastern women of the time of the novel’s setting. What makes a woman’s body beautiful within a multicultural society is reflected through Western gaze. There are some references to the Eastern beauty ideals inasmuch as they are related to the Western canoni just like the cases of Philothei’s veil as the second skin or simulation of beauty, and beauty as a kind of blessing or a curse at the same time so as to show beauty as danger.

Starting from the beauty as proportion, beauty as harmony, beauty as goodness, beauty as truth, beauty as a subjective quality, etcetera, beauty starts to be discussed as a quality that restricts people to some constructed ideals, to which many people fail to adapt. In the postmodern period, as all the metanarratives start to be questioned, the concept of beauty is challenged too. Some ideas of beauty that belong to different ages are reconstructed or deconstructed in literary works of postmodern era, and the way these concepts are reflected in *Birds Without Wings* have been a part of this research.



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