

# The Hotel Narrative in Turkish, Mexican, and Bengali Fiction

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It is a great honor to be able to speak at this webinar,<sup>1</sup> and I thank the ULAB authorities for giving me this time. I came to ULAB a year ago, and I have very fond memories of Dhanmondi and all the friendliness and hospitality I received. The feeling is definitely reciprocated.

Today I am going to talk a little bit about the hotel in world literature. I am going to go through it as quickly as possible without getting too bogged down in the minutiae of what the text says. We are looking at three hotel novels. The talk is based on a chapter of my new book, *World Literature Decentered*. I think it is important to start by saying why I am talking about Mexico, Turkey, and Bengal. The book largely comes out of a series of frustrations with current concepts of world literature and world history, concepts which I, and an increasing number of scholars, feel are overwhelmingly Euro-American in nature. I always begin by saying that the West is ten percent of the planet or that Europe and America make up ten percent of the planet. So the non-West is not some token minority that needs our attention – it is the overwhelming majority of this world. So that really is the wider context here. Instead of theoretically deconstructing notions of world literature, I am trying really to performatively engage with it through three non-Western regions, and those three regions, those three literary traditions if you like, are Turkey, Bengal, and Mexico. And there are about five topics that I choose: I look at melancholy, I look at the ghost story, I look at Orientalism ... but one of those chapters is on the hotel.

So, that is really where this is coming from today; it is a chapter within this wider text. Why the hotel? There is something quite curious about the hotel. In a way, it is a collection, a box of stories. I think what is curious about the hotel narrative is that it addresses simultaneously the question of the micro and the macro. So, on the one hand, it is an accommodation of a whole series of miniature existences, and in a sense, it reflects the hotel itself. The hotel is an accommodation of the particularities of individual existences. I mean, in many ways, what is interesting about the hotel,

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<sup>1</sup> This webinar was presented on November 27, 2020 at the Fall 2020 Seminar Series organized by the Department of English and Humanities (DEH), University of Liberal Arts Bangladesh (ULAB). The lecture was transcribed by Khadija Rubaiyat Tasmia (Supervisor, The English Zone, ULAB), Mashiur Rahaman, Vincent Dip Gomes, and Shahriyer Hossain Shetu (students of DEH). It is based on a chapter taken from Ian Almond, *World Literature Decentered: Beyond the 'West' through Turkey, Mexico and Bengal* (Routledge, 2021). The lecture may be viewed at <https://www.facebook.com/125162620861384/videos/222975315894460>.



in a macro political sense, is that it is on the cusp of a series of overlapping paradigms within modernity. So the most obvious thing to say here is that the hotel is largely a nineteenth-century product of industrial and, indeed, colonial modernity. It is a consequence of an increasingly bourgeois society, the leisure needs of an increasingly bourgeois travelling class, and it is certainly connected to empire itself. In some ways, it could even be seen as a facilitator of colonial influence – you do not need me to tell you how much this is reflected in South Asian cities.

The main hotels here have always had these imperial sounding names, so I think what is perhaps most interesting is that the hotel is a moment of alienation. It is where you purchase alienation if you like, you purchase for a limited amount of time, a space, and a time in which you can separate yourself, at your own expense, from your community. And for that reason perhaps it often has these seedy images. Because you escape momentarily from your community in a hotel, it is a place that invites transgressive practices. So, for all of these different reasons, the hotel tells a great deal about larger issues, larger frameworks, socio-political frameworks, and indeed even, I would argue, theological and philosophical questions. And that is what we are gravitating towards today in looking at these three novels. Shankar is obviously the pen name derived from Mani Shankar Mukherjee. His novel *Chowringhee*, translated by Arunava Sinha in 2010, appeared in the original Bangla version in 1962. Yusuf Atilgan's *Anayurt Oteli*, the Turkish novel written in 1973, *Motherland Hotel* in English, was translated, I would say, five or six years ago, and then finally we have a novel which is yet to be translated in English, Guillermo Fadanelli's *Hotel DF*, a Mexican novel from 2010.

What I am really interested in here is examining what the function of the hotel is in these narratives, what role it has, what implications – political, psychological, existential – it has, and to what extent hotel narratives, in particular from these three very different regions, reflect transcultural patterns of modernity, and the transcultural mechanisms of modernity's project. When I say hotel narratives here, what I mean is a text that has the hotel as the center of its narrative. The hotel narrative is not simply a narrative, which has a hotel playing a function in the background, in a peripheral way. There are lots of stories like this. In Roberto Bolano's *2666*, the first volume starts at a hotel. There is Elena Garro's *Memories of Things to Come*, a Mexican novel which has the Hotel Jardin as a kind of Edenic space within the novel. And, of course, other texts in Turkish literature, for example, Tomris Uyar's *Guests of the Dying Hotel*, can be considered as hotel narratives. Adalet Agaoglu's *Ölmeye Yatmak (Lying Down to Die)* has not been translated into English, but it is a suicide novel set largely in a hotel, and so on. So what we are really looking at are novels and short stories which revolve around the idea of the hotel in a kind of referential way, as they stage, or if you like, foreground the device of the hotel. And,

of course, I should just finally add that these three novels are all based on physical hotels.

Shankar's *Chowringhee* is based on the hotel Shahjahan, a fictitious hotel based on a real hotel in the heart of Calcutta. Yusuf Atilgan's *Motherland Hotel* is a fictitious hotel but based on a town, probably in present-day Manisa in western Turkey, and Guillermo Fadanelli's *Hotel Isabel* is also set in the middle of DF, the acronymic name for Mexico City (Distrito Federal).

We will start with Shankar's *Chowringhee*, a funny, interesting, and brilliantly written novel, which tells the tale of the narrator Shankar who gets a job working in one of the largest hotels in the immediate aftermath of the Raj in 1950s India. It was the subject of a very famous 1968 film. It has been called "India's corporate story" but I think that it does a disservice to the much more ambivalent relationship to capitalism that you get in the text. So, even though of course there is ultimately the authority, and particularly the sentimentality which is sometimes given to the Hotel Shahjahan in the text, the ultimate legitimacy of the idea of a five-star hotel is never really called into question. Nevertheless, there are extremely acidic moments where Shankar almost references a kind of poison that the hotel oozes, one that has an enormously corrosive atmosphere on whoever works or lives in it. I will get into this a little bit later but there is even a sense in which there is something quasi-supernatural about the hotel. There is something about the number of deaths that are connected with the hotel which I think in many ways highlights a much more materialistic, cynical attitude towards the concentration of capital which obviously a five-star hotel like that represents.

I think the most obvious thing to say about the idea of the hotel here is that you get the idea of the hotel as a tomb of Empire. In *Chowringhee* the protagonist is the clerk of the last English barrister of the Raj before independence came. Moreover, the hotel owner's name is Marco Polo. He has a resemblance to Churchill, and, in fact, there are all kinds of ways in which Empire and not just the British Empire but also the Moghul insinuates itself in the text – we will see this also in the other texts. In the Turkish novel, the *Motherland Hotel* is basically an Ottoman palace from the Tanzimat period. And we will also see this in *Hotel DF* – even the name of the hotel is Hotel Isabel, after the queen of Spain who, together with Ferdinand, "discovered," so to speak, their *Nuevo Mundo*, the new world, and we see all of these imperial echoes in these three texts. But certainly in *Chowringhee*, you do get the sense of the Hotel Shahjahan as a kind of last tenuous link to the dying Raj. So there is an almost displaced sense in which the literally postcolonial atmosphere of the Raj with its muffins, and English tea, and English menus, and Indian workers called Johnny and Rodger and Sally, persist almost in a kind of sepulchral way. To underline that,

let us have a quick look at some examples here:

The centuries-old spirit [*shotabdi prahina atma*] of Shahjahan Hotel kept asking, ever louder, “Who are you? Why are you here?” (85, 73)

Life, youth and everything else in this city are transitory – nothing can defy eternity and keep standing in Calcutta. But Shahjahan Hotel stands upright with unbelievable arrogance ... It survives [*tike thakbe*] – and not even Simpson [the hotel founder] could have imagined that it would have withstood the ravages of time and lasted so long. (85, 75)

And the third one:

... we went to the Lower Circular Road cemetery ... Flowers in hand, we entered that silent city of the dead. ... None of them [boys of William Lane] ... was probably alive any more, but Shahjahan Hotel lived on, eternally young, beckoning the hungry, the thirsty and the lustful with its bewitching charm. (137, 119)

What I would like to stress here is really a sort of the sense of the undead, the idea that the Empire persists in a kind of lurid, obscene fashion. And I am thinking here openly of Freud and the notion of the Death Drive, and the idea that there is something about the spirit of Empire which is obscene and lewd, and persists in its own almost lugubrious obstinacy. It does really make me think as well of Lacan’s idea that authority and obscenity are somehow linked. That obscenity is like the unspeakable inverse of authority, and certainly, there is something of this sense in the Hotel Shahjahan. And as I said, it even lends the physical place an almost uncanny atmosphere, an uncanny feeling in this respect.

The second thing I just want to say about *Chowringhee* before I go on to the next novel is that there is another aspect of this, which is really the idea of misogyny. The idea of the hotel as a femicidal space; and again you find this in all three novels. In *Hotel DF* there is the murder of one of the guests, Sophia. There is also this sense that it is a hotel that is regularly used for sex trafficking and the murder of women. And then of course in the Turkish novel, there is the pivotal moment – his murder of the chambermaid – which changes the hotel owner and turns him into a kind of maniac.

But certainly, the misogyny is also there in Shankar’s *Chowringhee*. And I would argue that although it is a very funny novel, and it is a brilliantly funny novel, some of the darkest subtexts in the novel are the way a sort of under-age prostitution takes place and where the hotel owners are trying to get dancing girls and making sure they are as young as possible, but also the various ways in which female workers in the story are killed or commit suicide. And again, it does suggest that there

is something not just patriarchal but *femicidally* patriarchal about the idea of the hotel. Maybe this is not wholly unrelated to the point I just made previously about the lurid undead feel of the hotel as a *topos*.

So that brings us on to the second novel which is Yusuf Atılgan's *Anayurt Oteli* or *Motherland Hotel*. This is a novel, which is written in 1973, and like *Chowringhee* it was the subject of a very famous Turkish film in 1980. So both of the texts led to successful cinema adaptations. I think the main thing to say about *Motherland Hotel*, with respect to the other two, is that it is a much darker novel. In terms of the hotels, whereas Hotel Isabel and Hotel Shahjahan are flourishing city center institutions that attract a lively and diverse clientele, *Motherland Hotel* is a little seedier, located in the back of a railway station in a provincial town in post-war Turkey. The customers that come through its doors are usually either prostitutes, unmarried couples, or homosexuals. So it is definitely highlighting them in all transgressive aspects that we might associate with hotels. Like *Chowringhee*, it starts off in a comic way because the hotel owner Zeberjet is a classic case of OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder). The first third of the novel documents quite comically the extent to which he has special routines, all the various things he puts in various pockets and the pathological way he observes these routines. For example: the legal, aboveboard things he puts into his right pocket, and all the kind of *haram*, morally dubious things go into his left pocket. The pathology of the hotel owner in the second half of the novel becomes very unfunny. Because the chambermaid whose sexual services he has always enjoyed is suddenly murdered by him in a fit of rage, primarily because another very beautiful woman with whom Zeberjet has fallen in love at first sight, promises she will come back on the next train from Ankara and never arrives. The crushing disappointment of this, ontologically if you like, causes his world to collapse and what you get in the second half of the novel is a series of increasingly bizarre, maniacal gestures as Zeberjet in effect mentally dissolves.

One final thing I would like to suggest here is the use of the hotel as a secular space, perhaps not just as a secular space but a godless space, a place that resists religion. We have seen this in the other two novels as well. In *Chowringhee*, in the Hotel Shahjahan there is really only one religious character, Nityahari, who goes around singing *Kaali Maa Kaali*. He is really the only religious figure; otherwise, it is an extremely secular novel. And also, when we get to *Hotel DF*, the only religious moment there is a sort of pseudo-Catholic moment of vision as the narrator describes the girl of their dreams, and how she appeared in an apparition to him. But otherwise, both novels very much rest on an animosity, I would say, towards the notion of another world. And it is certainly seen in *Motherland Hotel* as well.

So what do I mean when I say the “hotel as a secular space?” This is partly seeing the

hotel as a development of modernity, as something which perhaps even offers services which parallel religion: the idea of a community, the idea of a self-mythologizing entity, the idea of a venue where one might find refuge, but I think also, what obviously lies within this, is a sense of a kind of nihilism, which perhaps, results from the withdrawal of the subject from a community, the creation, if you like, of a God-proof pocket where one might seek refuge from the outside laws of religion, modernity, and morality.

And, of course, in the Turkish novel, this coincides with the establishment of the Turkish Republic, specifically the culture. I am going to be culturally specific here for a moment. In Atilgan's novel, there is an explicit series of allusions to the *Jumhuriyat*, to the Turkish republic. The *Motherland Hotel*, unsurprisingly, is founded in 1922, the same year as the republic, and there is a portrait of Atatürk on the wall. There is definitely a sense of some kind of a very uncomfortable allusion, as the metaphor of the secular republic is being played out in this form of a hotel – of a failed hotel in many ways, and a hotel which attracts homicide and suicide, because the owner hangs himself at the end in the hotel. This is the idea of the hotel as the antithesis of a religious narrative. And then secondly, perhaps, we might also consider the work of Siegfried Kracauer and his famous essay on the hotel lobby, “Die Hotelhalle” (1922), where he argues that the hotel might be considered almost the inversion of the image of God's house, a place where we congregate with no overarching transcendental vision to bring us together. That text is, ironically, as early as 1922, so very early on people were glimpsing that there is nothing new about the idea of the structure of the hotel as having very secular metaphysical possibilities. I think I'll mention another thing about the novel before going on to the third novel. We do see an emphasis on the concept of history and indeed even on the practice of history, in all three of these novels. So, one of the characters in Fadanelli's *Hotel DF* is a historian. In Shankar's *Chowringhee*, there is a very curious sense that, all the way through the novel, there is a constant, almost archival obsession with the history of the hotel. There is almost something quasi-theological about the way we never really meet the English founder – he is kind of mythologized, all we hear are records about him, so there is a vague obsession with the chronicling of the hotel. We certainly see this obsession reflected as well in *Motherland Hotel*, if we look at this passage from the middle:

Registers from the previous years were stored in a chest under the stairs together with some thick history books of his father's, printed in the old Arabic script (*eski yaz birkac tarih kitabıyla birlikte*). Once Zeberjet was out of grade school his father had taught him this script.

Zeberjet does not know why, beneath the stairs of the hotel, there is an old set of

ledgers written in the Ottoman Arabic script. First of all, for people who are not familiar, this is an explicit reference to the Romanization of the Turkish alphabet, which took place in 1928. So this rupture, this orthographical rupture, shows where a whole generation was made illiterate overnight. What we see here is, increasingly as the novel progresses, the gradual implosion and then explosion of history. We start out with very little sense of the *Motherland Hotel*, and we are brought into this world of anecdotes and stories, and we begin to get a much deeper sense of its history. It's almost the idea of history as a depth charge, and of this, if you like, subversive Arabic script (it was illegal to write in Arabic script after these alphabets were switched). There is something about the way in which the hotel becomes a reflection on history. The hotel is almost a kind of archival space in which history is meditated upon, but not in a healthy fashion, but rather almost incestuously and compulsively.

The third novel, Guillermo Fadanelli's *Hotel DF* (2010), is a recent novel, from ten years ago. Guillermo Fadanelli is a very prolific writer. He has written eleven novels, and this is the eighth one. His writings are sometimes referred to as "literatura basura," "garbage literature," literature which concerns the abject of society, the marginal of society, you might say almost the urban detritus of society. This novel has had a mixed reception, so people like Valeria Luiselli, the famous Mexican writer, have praised it as a voice from the margins, whilst other critics, most notably Diana Palaversich, have argued that this is actually a very misogynist book filled typically with male fantasies of the female. Whatever we feel about that, here is very much a sense of the hotel as a melancholic space. That is probably the main thing I would like to underline. At the same time, we find this melancholy in all three novels we are looking at. There is certainly an incremental secession from reality in Zeberjet in the Turkish novel, in the way he half lives out his unfulfilled life, and the melancholy expectations of a life that is never quite realized. And the Hotel Shahjahan is definitely melancholic, not just nostalgic – a longing for the good old times of the hotel's heyday – but also the broken dreams of the various people who work within the Shahjahan. Karabi, one of the female workers, hopes to marry the owner's son, and when this is denied, she commits suicide. Suicide and melancholy seem to belong almost intrinsically to the genre of the hotel novel. Certainly, in the Mexican novel *Hotel DF* too, we find a very melancholic space, I would say primarily because there is a diverse range of characters, socioeconomically. So we have drug dealers, academics, tourists, we have the whole gamut of demographics. But many of these characters are frustrated – fixated hopelessly on goals outside their means, trying to recover things that are irrecoverable, trapped in difficult relationships, and certainly the epitome of this is the protagonist whose name is Frank Henestrosa. Frank is, in many ways, a very saturnine protagonist. He has a melancholic air about

him. What he has in common with the other characters is that there is almost a sense of what Heidegger called *geworfenheit* or “thrownness.” The various characters in the novel (I am talking about all the guests in the *Hotel DF*) almost feel like they are thrown into the world – to use Heidegger’s term, *geworfen* – as they are senseless and drifting randomly. Here are a couple of quotes from Frank, the protagonist of the novel:

If I wasn’t a hypocrite, I would help [the chambermaid] do the cleaning. But if I did I would lose her respect. (130)

What am I looking for I don’t know, perhaps my own face .... (80)

In front of an old mirror on the wall that suddenly reflects the reception of the Hotel Isabel, I observe my own sad image [*observo mi triste imagen*] ... If I didn’t have money on me it would probably depress me just seeing the orderly, modest gentleman. And who doesn’t get depressed at my age. (41-2)

Certainly, what we are seeing here is the idea of the hotel as an alienating space, as a space in which, I was about to say, a forced introspection takes place. In many ways, this space subtly inflicts a melancholic introspection upon the guests. Some of this is due to physical isolation, but of course, partly through the psychological and mental isolation which occupying a small room entails. There is this sort of dissolution of identity that we get in several of the characters. I am interested in the way the hotel is seen as emblematic of the modern crisis of the subject, and the way the characters are existentially blended together in this novel to provide a larger comment on Mexican society, and, I think, in many ways as well, getting back to religion, on the idea of a fallen world. So we have very much a godless world.

From the hotel lobby of the Mexican hotel, the portrait of Queen Isabel is removed by the end of the story. It is almost explicitly a theocidal moment, when we have Hotel Isabel without its Isabel. But there is the world of centerless crime where we hear of a lot of crime going on, but we are not quite sure of who is doing what to whom; we are told it happens on the 2nd floor – which reminds me of José Emilio Pacheco’s wonderful short story about, among other things, someone who digs a tunnel and discovers a corpse in this tunnel, and the idea that whenever you dig a tunnel in Mexico you always come across two other tunnels. Whenever you try to investigate a crime, you come across two or three crimes that you are not looking for. The world is intrinsically lost, beyond any kind of moral order or moral recoverability. Certainly, the *Hotel DF* communicates this in a very saturnine way. It does make you wonder why these writers inject this sense of melancholy into the hotel novel. And I would say there is almost a sense of mimetic compensation here, that there is something about the melancholic atmospheres that are injected into

these hotel stories. It reminds me actually of Deleuze's idea of the Baroque. Deleuze talks about the multiple chambers of the Baroque, whether it is in Leibniz, whether it is in Bach, whether it is in the *Trauerspiel*. Deleuze argues that the Baroque is the last attempt to restore the broken shattered fragments of the classical before it is lost completely. And you get the sense here perhaps that in the multiple chambers of these hotel narratives, in the melancholy they instill, again we see this idea of a final, failed attempt at recovering some sense of order.

What we are really gravitating towards here actually is the idea that there is some kind of relationship between death and the hotel in literature. There is some sort of connection or some sort of fundamentally-constituted relationship between death and hotels when we encounter them in literary texts. We can just hop around the Western canon and we know this much, right? The Gresham in James Joyce's "The Dead," Hotel des Bains in Thomas Mann's "Death in Venice," "To Room Nineteen" by Doris Lessing; and then, of course, we find these in the regional literatures we are speaking of as well. So there's some sort of connection here, something almost thanatological about the motif of the hotel. And why? There is definitely a local reason that we could give in each of these cases. We can certainly suggest that in the case of the Shahjahan we are looking at the death of the British Empire and the various literary ways in which, wittingly or unwittingly, the spirit of the Raj is trying to resurrect itself in these texts. The literary text is a kind of wake for the empire. In the case of Turkey, again, we could look at the ways in which the Ottoman Empire is often thanatologized, is often as seen as synonymous with death. And certainly the idea of the ghost of the Ottoman Empire spectrally persisting in this hotel and even perhaps the kind of comment, on a different note, on the suicidal nature of secular modernity that Atilgan is making about the Kemalist modernizing project. The fact that the hotel owner in the end kills himself, and that too at the exact time and day of Ataturk's funeral, again would suggest some sort of political comment here linking death with secular modernity. Finally, I think with the Mexican novel there is a whole range of already extant criticism, I think most famously in the work of Claudio Lomnitz, which talks about the way Mexico is a classic text on – how does he put it? – the nationalization of death, how death has been incorporated in Mexican society as a motif. Xavier Villarutia, the Mexican poet, famously said that life is a nostalgia for death. We could go on, it is a very lugubrious thought-train, but my point is that you could find some sort of local specific reasons for this synonymy of death and the literary hotel. But I think that for me at least there are two theoretical avenues as well.

The first would be a psychoanalytical one, so we would see, if the hotel is seen as a sexually transgressive place (a place you could go to for extra-marital sex or prostitution or homosexual sex). The text here might be seen in a psychoanalytical

way as punishing the transgression, a textual sort of punishing. Interestingly, you see this in particularly the *Shahjahan*, how all of the moments were some kind of boundaries overstepped by the female protagonists they have murdered. Not certainly murdered by other people, but the author textually murders them. All three protagonists of these novels are, sort of, sexually frustrated, impotent weak men. And that violence, the culminating death that drives these texts, may well have some kind of psychoanalytical relationship to them.

Another avenue might be a historicizing attitude towards the secular, seeing the hotel, if you like, if you can think of a fictional approach to the project of secular modernity, as something which sees in the structure of the hotel an almost allegorical version of the nation, of the country. These allegorical allusions are explicit in all three texts. All three hotels are at various points associated with India, Mexico, or Turkey. Maybe here there is a comment on the kind of nihilism which ultimately culminates within these projects. So it is almost like the hotel is a kind of experimental petri dish, in which the processes of the secular are examined and led to a mortal conclusion. I think I am going to wind up with that.