

Narrating Neurodiversity in Turkey: An Emerging Literary Genre?

Abstract

Building on the clinical observations of Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger, societal discourses about autism have historically been shaped by psychiatric perspectives. Within medical frameworks, autism is often defined in relation to deviations from social norms. For example, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5, 2022) characterizes autism spectrum disorder (ASD) by persistent deficits in social communication, alongside restricted and repetitive behaviors. Beyond the medical lens, cultural representations of autism have significantly influenced public perceptions. Since the portrayal of Raymond in *Rain Man* (1988), media and literature have often stereotyped autism as a predominantly male, white, and heterosexual condition. Popular novels and TV series reinforce the trope of the socially awkward yet brilliant “autistic savant.”

For a long time, autism narratives have been predominantly shaped by non-autistic authors. However, in recent years, there has been a significant shift in the Global North, with autistic voices increasingly challenging prevailing stereotypes by narrating autism in their own literary works. Autistic writers use novels, poetry, memoirs, and comics to present autism from an internal perspective as a neurodivergent reality. This talk investigates whether—and to what extent—this new development is also visible in the contemporary literary landscape of Turkey. Whose voices and whose autism narratives are heard in Turkish literature? Are they predominantly those of non-autistic or autistic authors? Combining literary analysis with insights from autistic-led research in Neurodiversity and Critical Autism Studies, the talk examines whether these narratives adopt the neurodiversity paradigm or reinforce the pathological discourse, framing autism as either a disorder or a relational form of otherness. This interdisciplinary approach aims to expand the understanding of autism’s cultural and literary representations in a global context, with a particular focus on Turkish literature.

Bio

Johanna Chovanec is a post-doctoral researcher at the Department of Comparative Literature, University of Vienna. She teaches and conducts research in the fields of modern Turkish literature, post-imperial studies, literary theory, health humanities and neurodiversity studies. Johanna’s work explores the intersections of literature and cultural studies, with a particular focus on how historical and contemporary narratives shape and reflect societal understandings of identity and belonging. Her doctoral thesis, “Turkey’s Occidental Condition: Images of Self and Other in Early Republican Literature,” was awarded the Fritz and Helga Exner Dissertation Award (2024). Recently, her seminar “Neurodiversity in Literature: Narrating the Autism Spectrum” received the UNIVIE Teaching Award (2024).