

THE APPROACH TO BOOKS IN SOSUKE NATSUKAWA'S *THE CAT THAT SAVED THE BOOKS*

SOSUKE NATSUKAWA'NIN KITAPLARI KURTARAN KEDI'SİNDE KİTAP

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ABSTRACT

The fantastic literature is a genre that always attracts attention because of the extraordinary features of its nature. *The Cat That Saved the Books* is essentially a fantasy story; however, it also has messages in the context of the book. The protagonist of the novel is a bookish high school student preparing to close up the bookstore inherited from his grandfather. While the boy makes preparations to move out in the bookstore, the story takes on a fantastic dimension with the appearance of a talking cat. They have a mission to free books by moving to a fantasy world under the leadership of the cat. They need to go to several mazes in which there are wrong perceptions about books. They try to refute the false perceptions about books in those mazes to let books free. In the end, they complete each task they undertake successfully and set the books free. This study deals with the messages given about books through a fantastic story.

Key Words: Fantastic Novel, Book, Misperception.

ÖZET

Fantastik edebiyat, sıra dışı doğası gereği her zaman dikkat çeken bir tür olagelmiştir. *Kitaplari Kurtaran Kedi* aslında bir fantastik hikâye olsa da, kitap bağlamında oluşan yanlış algılar konusunda verdiği mesajlar da var. Romanın kahramanı, büyükbabasından miras kalan kitabevini kapatmaya hazırlanan kitapsever bir lise öğrencisidir. Çocuk kitapçığı tahliye etmek için hazırlıklar yaparken, konuşan bir kedinin ortaya çıkmasıyla roman fantastik bir boyut kazanır. Kedinin öncülüğünde bir fantezi dünyasına geçerek kitapları özgür bırakmak gibi bir görevleri vardır. Kitap hakkında yanlış algıların olduğu birkaç labirente gitmeleri gerekmektedir. Kitapları özgür bırakmak için bu labirentlerdeki kitaplarla ilgili oluşan yanlış algıları çürütmeye çalışırlar. Sonunda üstlendikleri her görevi başarıyla tamamlarlar ve kitapları serbest kalmasını sağlarlar. Bu çalışma, fantastik bir hikâye üzerinden kitaplar hakkında verilen mesajları ele almaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Fantastik Roman, Kitap, Yanlış Algı.

I. INTRODUCTION

The fantastic literature is a genre that always attracts attention because of the features of its nature. Its extraordinary nature arouses the curiosity of the human beings. It is not easy to determine the origin of the fantastic stories. It may be as old as the human history. Since human imagination always pushes the boundaries, it can be said that fantastic dreams and consequently fantastic stories date back to the same past as human existence. With the transition to written literature, early examples of this genre are seen in ancient Greek literature. Some parts of the tales in Homer's book *Odyssey* are exceptional examples of this genre (Holoka 1990, 99). Nowadays, with the adaptation of fantastic stories to cinema, interest in fantastic literature has increased even more. Fantastic literature is generally identified as high and low fantasy. This nomenclature does not mean that one is superior to

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the other (Angelskar 2005, 10). The mythical creatures and otherworldly places make a story to be classified a high fantasy work. To make a specific distinction; in high fantasy the space and time perception can be quite different than our normal world. In other words the story takes place in otherworldly lands. But in low fantasy the extraordinary events and creatures are observed in the normal world that we are acquainted with. "The designation "fantastic literature" cannot be reduced to a formula, for it has come to mean many things which need constant redefining" (Nandorfy 1991, 110). Not only can it be reduced to a formula, but also it cannot be restricted to a certain field. Since it is not limited by certain rules and definitions, it puts forward a wide area for the authors to write as much as they wish. Fantastic literature can be produced through many techniques, such as; epic, myth, romance, fable, fairy tales. Moreover they can be categorized in many different genres like science fiction, ghost stories, and weird tales.

II. THE FANTASTIC DIMENSION OF *THE CAT THAT SAVED THE BOOKS*

Essentially, fantastic literature appeals to readers of all ages. However, it is mostly addressed to child and adolescent. The fact that children are more interested in this genre is result of their imagination skills which are not washed away with the facts of life. In this regard children have no difficulty to match fantastic stories with their imaginations. However, *The Cat That Saved the Books* can be regarded as both an adult and a children's novel by its nature. The purpose of identifying the novel with children's literature stems from the fact that it reminds Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as fiction. In terms of travelling from land to land, it is similar to *The Little Prince* and it resembles to *Alice* in terms of following an animal to a fantastic world. *Alice* follows a rabbit and this situation leads her to a surreal world. She experiences a lot of different fantastic adventures in this world. In this regard the introduction of the *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is similar to *The Cat That Saved the Books*. The protagonist of *The Cat* is Rintaro Natsuki, a high school student whose grandfather has just passed away. His grandfather's bookstore status now depends on him. As he thinks about what to do in the bookstore, a talking cat shows up. The cat introduces himself as Tiger. Like *Alice* following the rabbit, Rintaro follows the cat and the cat leads him to a surreal world. During their transition from the normal world to the fantasy world in the hall of the bookstore, a white light surround them and they find themselves in another dimension.

The novel can be categorized as a low and high fantasy book. The surreal world that Rintaro is led by the cat should be assessed as a high fantasy. The decisive factor here is whether the space is worldly or not. The part of the story in which the talking cat appears takes place in the normal world, that's why this part of story is low fantasy. Another point is that while the cat is a fantastic hero, Rintaro is not (Atmaca 2020, 2). Natsukawa has not conceived this novel only as a fantasy book. There are messages he wants to give through fantasy. In *The Cat That Saved the Books*, Natsukawa has several criticisms to reading habits, commodification of books, philosophy of reading etc. While the novel can be regarded as a children's literature with its fantastic aspect, it can be determined as an adult book in terms of its messages and criticisms.

III. THE MESSAGES OF THE CAT THAT SAVED THE BOOKS

The bookish high school student, Rintaro Natsuki, inherits a second hand bookstore from his grandfather. The bookstore is one of the last places of its kind to find rare books. Fashionable bestsellers, popular magazines and comics are not available for sale in this bookstore (Natsukawa 2021, 18). Rintaro is a very ordinary and mediocre student, he is not even noticed in his absence at school. He is a well-behaved and not very sociable teenager who likes to pass most of his time at the bookstore. The bookstore is a shelter where Rintaro can breathe comfortably, a place where he escapes from the outside world. After his grandfather passes away Rintaro is left alone, he starts preparations to shut down the bookstore. It is noteworthy that Natsukawa chooses such an obscure character as the protagonist of the novel. While Rintaro makes preparations to move, a talking cat emerges from unknown.

The novel takes on a fantastic feature with the appearance of the extraordinary cat. There are certain purposes for the visit of the cat. The cat summons Rintaro to help him to rescue the books. This is how an ordinary character will turn into a hero. The striking point here is that the cat knows that Rintaro is an introverted and unattractive person. But he also refers to *The Little Prince* and points out that he has potential in him. "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye" (Saint-Exupery 2015, 67). In other words, the source of Rintaro's power that has not yet appeared is his love for the books. It does not take long for Rintaro to be convinced and go after the cat. As he follows the cat down the aisle of the Natsuki bookstore, they enter into a fantastic dimension through an intense light. The place they enter is called the first maze in the novel. This is how the high fantasy part of the novel begins.

The dimension they enter is different from the normal world in terms of time and space. Although it is December in the normal world, cotton trees have blossomed in this fantastic world. According to cat's declaration they have a mission to be carried out in this fantastic place. They come to a mansion where books are kept locked. The task they have to run is to release the locked books. When they enter the mansion, they encounter a magnificent Japanese interior design and decoration. It is a place where all kinds of books such as art, poetry, philosophy, letter, diary etc. are kept locked under glass covers.

While the fantastic dimension of the events comes to the fore up to this point, from now on the philosophical dimension of the events accompany the fantastic. In every maze there is a person who must be persuaded to liberate the books. There are false philosophies about books represented by these people in every maze. The first man's philosophy about books is to read as many books as possible, regardless of their type. Books that are not listed according to a certain category on the shelves are also an indication of this status. As a person who reads a lot, he criticizes the readers who are pedantic by picking some sentences from the books of Nietzsche or any great writer without reading all the works of those writers. Only when he realizes that Rintaro is a bookish person, he takes him seriously and spares some time for him.

A discussion takes place between the two about whether the importance of reading books is more important in terms of quantity or quality. The man claims that number matters in reading books, and that those who read twenty thousand books are worth more than those who read ten thousand (Natsukawa 2021, 40). In this regard, reading a book twice is wasteful,

it makes more sense to read ten books than to read a book ten times. According to him, the purpose of reading a book is to just read a book, to come to a certain place, which is to use books as a step. As it is clearly seen, this understanding, which does not give books the value they deserve, degrades books. Rintaro has different philosophy and ideas towards this approach. Rintaro must oppose his approach to books and persuade him to change his apprehension in order to free books. Rintaro remembers his grandfather, who had great love and respect for books, reading the important books until their pages were eroded. Rintaro states that the person who reads books just for the sake of reading will turn into a walking encyclopaedia. The purpose of a person who loves books is not to fulfil the expectations of society or to gain a status. When Rintaro convinces the man that he is not in love with the books, the books which are locked up become free and fly. The man's process of persuasion is not very compelling because Rintaro does not come up with a very strong and persuasive idea. The man's philosophy about reading books could be refuted on stronger grounds. After all, through this fantastic novel, Natsukawa criticizes how some people in society perceive the books. More or less, they successfully complete the task in the first maze and enable the books to be liberated.

In the second maze it is seen that another false perception of the book is addressed. Previous to this it is stated that Rintaro's grandfather worked at the university for a certain period of time and his university experience was a great disappointment. Since the university did not meet his expectations, he started the business of a second-hand book store. With this reference, it is understood that the subject to be addressed in the second maze will be related to the university. They enter to the second maze again under the leadership of the cat. The second place is reminiscent of Greek temples, there are quite busy people walking around in white aprons.

The depictions of the place create the perception that it is an academic environment. As in the previous maze, here there are plenty of books around as well. It is stated that this place is the largest reading institute in the world that conducts many different researches on reading (Natsukawa 2021, 68). Rintaro looks for a director or professor to address, as this place is an institute. His addressee insists on the high number of professors. The gravity of the situation is depicted ironically; it is stated that there are many new professors in research fields such as rhetoric, expression, style, phonetics, font and paper quality (Natsukawa 2021, 69). What Natsukawa criticizes here is that there is unnecessary number of professors at universities who put too much emphasis on unnecessary details and glorify ordinary things. The appearance, occupation and way of thinking of the people working in the institute, which is described as a large research centre, are similar (Natsukawa 2021, 69). Nonetheless, while describing the environment, it is strongly stated that the place is also far from innovation. Within this scope Matsukawa aims to highlight the monotonous and unrevolutionary nature of academic world. Eventually, they meet with the principal in charge of this place. The principal listens to Beethoven, wears scientist apron, but he has no intellectual flair. The aim of this institute is to work on new reading techniques. In this regard, the institute develops the activation of reading and speed reading techniques. The principal's philosophy is based on the fact that there are too many books in the world but not enough time to read them.

In order to make books more accessible, the principal adds the new outline technique to the speed reading technique. The basis of this technique is to summarize the summary of a book. Thus, a mediocre and easily understandable essence is obtained by removing items such as technical terms, phrases, character traits, which are the basic elements of a book (Natsukawa 2021, 77). This practice is exemplified by a storybook of Osamu Dazai, titled

Run, Melos! This classic story book is; “widely read in Japan as a story of fidelity and endurance in the face of adversity” (Vardaman 1987, 243). As a result of the techniques applied by the principal, this storybook is reduced to a one-sentence statement. The principal, who is defined as the man who cuts and trims the books, summarizes the storybook with the phrase *Melos is angry*. So he suggests that reading this single sentence will replace reading the entire storybook. The principal's new project is to reduce *Faust* to a level that can be read in two minutes. In this maze, Rintaro's task is to convince the principal about his wrong approach to reading concept. Rintaro puts forward various ideas to persuade the principal. He recalls that his grandfather compared reading a book to climbing a mountain and advised him to climb the high mountain if he was going to climb. In this respect he states that trying to simplify books is needless. Tough books provide gains as much as their difficulties. Sometimes it is necessary to reflect on some sentences and re-read them accordingly. Unable to convince the manager with such ideas, Rintaro makes a different move. While Beethoven's 9th symphony is playing, Rintaro presses the fast winding button of the cassette player. Rintaro associates the disruption of the harmony of fast-playing music with shortening the books for the sake of speed reading. This move causes the principal to be convinced about his malpractice and wrong philosophy. The scissors that the principal uses to trim the books disappear. With the liberation of the books in this maze, the second mission of the Rintaro and the cat comes to an end. When they return from fantasy world to normal world, Rintaro realizes that time has never passed in the world they live.

In the first two mazes, the reader and the academic world are criticized in terms of their wrong approaches to book, while in the third maze, the publishing pillar of the books is criticized. The title of the third labyrinth is named as the seller and distributor. Here again they come to a fantastic world by passing through lights. In this maze, the high walls are made of books stacked on top of each other. Here the books that are not arranged in a certain order, some of them are crushed, and some eroded. They reach a building by walking through the stacked books. A woman in a suit with a mechanical voice and a mechanical smile expresses that they have come to the world's top publishing house. Outside the building, there is a battered pile of books like a mountain. The person they should meet in this maze is the master of the publishing house. As in previous mazes here it is not easy to reach the master as well. Each host takes visitors to the next altar. In this process, they encounter certain absurd situations. While bags and other items are not allowed to enter in the first stage, it is forbidden to enter the authority and title in the later stages, and in the next stage, it is seen as objectionable to bring in feelings such as evil and hostility. Thus and so, they can reach the master after going through a long protocol process. The place is a huge skyscraper where books are scattered all around. Here, a criticism is made for the publishers who publish tons of books regardless of their academic and literary value. Natsukawa skilfully absorbed criticisms that a writer would not easily dare into his narrative (Erkin 2021, 3). Situations such as handling the book only as a wrapping material, commodification of books, printing only the books that will make profit and measuring the value of the book by the number of printed pieces are criticized.

As Rintaro introduces himself as a second-hand bookseller, the commoditizing mentality's perspective to second-hand booksellers is exposed. According to the master, the second-hand bookshops are unprogressive and repulsive places that pile up unsold hard books like mountains. It is understood from this that the book publishing companies may be huge and grandiose, but they treat the book as a commodity rather than a value. The situation Matsukawa underlines in this maze is that the philosophy of the big publisher company is based entirely on financial concerns. To exemplify this situation; Kafka's and Camus's works

are of immense literary value, but their sales levels are low, so the master is not in favour of publishing their books. In this maze, the only thing Rintaro does is to make the master believe that he actually loves the books. When it comes to the conviction that books are not commodities but they are values, the books in this maze also becomes free.

The last maze becomes an overview of the previous three mazes. In the final maze, Rintaro confronts a woman who seems to be the spiritual of books. It takes place in the form of an overview of what Rintaro has done to date. The plight of the men in the first three mazes is depicted as a result of Rintaro's persuasion. It is observed that the value judgments of the men in the three mazes have changed. The three men do not regret the decision they have made, on the contrary, they show a supportive attitude towards Rintaro. There is agreement among all the characters that the books have a great power and value. They also agree that books teach people to think heartfelt and empathy. After the last maze, the fantastic journeys Rintaro started with a cat come to an end.

IV. CONCLUSION

The novel by Matsukawa contains some messages given through a fantastic story. The concept of the book is the basis of the messages given in the story. Along with modernization, the book sector, the perception of the book and reader's approach to the book has undergone great changes. It is a fact that with the commodification of the book, the values it carries in essence lose their importance. In this regard *The Cat That Saved Books* bring criticism to the three pillars of the book sector: the reader in the first maze, the academic world in the second, and the book publishers in the third. While dealing with today's reader, the deviation of the main purpose of reading is criticized. In the second maze, the approach of the academic world to the book is criticized. The academy puts too much emphasis on unnecessary details and glorifies ordinary things. In the last maze, the commodification of books by large publishing houses is criticized. Although it is a fantastic story in this respect, it also touches a reality of life. The protagonist of the novel fights misperceptions against the book by navigating in fantastic worlds. Although he has justified reasons to liberate the books, he does not make very strong defences in some places. The reason why people who misapply the book or have a wrong philosophy are easily convinced is that their attitudes are unfounded. Nevertheless, he enables the liberation of books by successfully completing his tasks.

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