

# AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF REPRESENTATIONS OF NATURE IN MODERN TURKISH NOVEL

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**Abstract:** *Modern Turkish novel developed in the 19th century, greatly inspired by the translations of foreign models. Since then, it has undergone a gradual transformation in terms of style, subject matter and innovative genres and modes of expression thanks to the potentials provided by local cultural and traditional literary sources. Of those, people's ballads, court poetry and folkstories and songs which have celebrated the geographical, regional and natural characteristics of the homeland and which portrayed the forms of a relationship between the human and nature lie deep in the cultural memory and consciousness of the people. Such a literary climate enables novelists to weave several representations of this relationship between human and nature as a dominating metaphor or motif in their work. In this paper, I will trace the manifestations of this relationship and their artistic and literary functions in the novel Kuyucaklı Yusuf (Yusuf from Kuyucak) by Sabahattin Ali, and Ortadirek (The Wind from the Plain) by Yaşar Kemal.*

**Key words:** *ecocriticism, Kuyucaklı Yusuf, Ortadirek, modern Turkish novel, human and nature*

Although ecocriticism first appeared in 1978 in William Rueckert's essay "Literature and Ecology: An experiment in Ecocriticism", it had to wait for the 1990s to be taken up as a separate discipline in literary studies. Actually, ecocriticism is a very inclusive term under which multiple concepts and studies cluster, ranging from biology, geology, science, psychology, linguistics, and literature which contribute to the definition and practice of this relatively new discipline. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm are the first researchers who came up with a substantial definition for ecocriticism in 1996 in the words: "simply put, ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (p. xviii). According to Glotfelty, ecocriticism is an "earth-centered approach", the complex intersections between environment and culture, believing that "human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (1996, p. xix). Historically speaking, nature-human relation has been taken up philosophically for many ages, emphasized by Descartes as a dualism of soul and the body, where animals, unlike humans do not possess soul or spirit and

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are inferior as opposed to a man. These views, known as anthropocentric view, put man in the center of the universe and as superior to all other natural and inanimate objects and thus have a claim on them to use them for man's own needs and good. The unprecedented technological developments and the proliferation of innovation and mass production due to the globalization of learning and sciences have unfortunately aggravated the depletion and exploitation of nature and everything that are related to it. The resulting environmental crisis in today's world and the irresponsible consumption of nature and natural resources in all geographies to the degree of devastation have led thinkers, and scientists alike to raise awareness of the imminent threat posed to the very existence of the universe with all its living and non-living things. Today, the approach to ecocriticism has invented ways to question the concepts of human and the non-human, nature, and non-nature so as to frame the environmental crisis by way of challenging these long-standing concepts as appropriated in literature. These attempts led to a redefinition of the terms environment, landscape, and nature. Now environment suggests not only the natural environment but also the urban environment in which all the human and non-human live and are affected by the conditions they live in and sustain their existence. Hence, ecocritical reading of a literary text is an attempt to discover the relation between human and the non-human within the specter of nature and the environment and how this relationship manifests itself as an interconnectedness between all these species as dealt with in literature. It is an initiative that shows how this interconnectedness is depicted in literature by way of not merely displaying natural descriptions in texts, but by also focusing on the shaping influence that characterization, focalization, genre, and narrative and sentence structure have on representations of nature-man interconnectedness (Bracke, 2019, p.1).

Consequently, this paper will develop around the exploration of how nature-man, human-nonhuman dichotomy is displayed from an ecocritical prism in the modern Turkish novel by performing an ecocritical reading and interpretation of two distinguished Turkish authors, namely Yaşar Kemal and Sabahattin Ali. The novels to be studied are *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* (Yusuf of Kuyucaklı) by Sabahattin Ali and *Ortadirek* (The Wind from the Plain) by Yaşar Kemal, respectively.

Environmental topics appeared in Turkish literature as early as the beginning of the 20th century with the development of the realistic wave in modern Turkish literature. Initially, these topics were concerned with provincial and pastoral elements as literary motifs or as village novels and stories depicting the life of the peasants in villages and small towns, their hardships, problems and the challenges they faced as opposed to the more developed regions and towns. The authors at this stage were concerned with the social and economic problems that came into being as a result of urbanization, political developments, and societal mobility. Hence the authors such as Sabahattin Ali, the poet Nazım Hikmet, Yaşar Kemal and many others begun to use the novel and the short story genre

to criticize and to point out the unfavorable aspects of the society and social order the Anatolian people were living in. Sabahattin Ali, in that sense, is the forerunner of Anatolian novel school not only because of his subject matter but because of his ability to employ Anatolian people's folk stories and motifs in his novels.

*Kuyucaklı Yusuf* is Sabahattin Ali's the best-known novel of his lifetime which was relatively short. The subject-matter of this novel is the conflict between the corrupt administrators sided with the notables, and the townspeople who are exposed to their ill-treatment and injustice. The novel was published in 1937, and although the events in the novel take place in the last two decades of the Ottoman Empire, the structure of the society when the book was written was still more or less similar.

The novel *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* deals with the subject of nature on two planes, since they both are thematically central in the story instead of only being an accessory of the subject-matter. First of all, the hero Yusuf himself is an image of a man ill-treated by other people's inconsiderate attitudes and intentional and egoistic and even murderous intentions. Yusuf, surrounded by such an environment can not feel himself at ease with his surroundings, adopted family and peers. "Indeed, whatever he did whoever he befriends with, he could not adapt himself to these townspeople at all" (Ali, 2019, p. 26, trans. mine). The theme of alienation and isolation in the midst of the material life that Yusuf experiences are felt and expressed by Yusuf only when he finds himself in nature:

Yusuf stared into the night while he leaned his back to the big oak tree. The trees standing on both banks of the stream, the muddy path with the shining puddles, leading to the town, the darkening and ascending and clearing and descending clouds entangled and entwined, looked overcast and lost in each other. It was if there existed nothing by itself in nature at that point in time. Yusuf felt glued to this immense and uniform night and he shuddered....He was all alone in this spreading immense night that emerged from the stars above to the pebbles at the bottom of the stream, from the clouds that rolled over from the east to the sea on the west.... ( Ali, 2019, p. 87, trans. mine).

Yusuf's self-realization that takes place in nature, seeking and finding solace in nature and the natural, has been interpreted as a romantic trait in his character. Similarly, Selahattin Bey, Yusuf's adopted father, another important figure in the story resigns to nature amid the suffocating and corrupt relations in the town and among townspeople: "The suffocating stillness and the meaninglessness of the house, Yusuf's unconvincing and evading attitude, Muazzez's increasing languish and finally, Şahinde's relentless nagging choked him. After having his lunch at home, he threw himself out. He went for a walk towards the north of town" (Ali, 2019, p. 179, trans. mine).

Selahattin Bey leaves the suffocating air of home and the feeling of remorse and injustice he feels towards the events that took place in the courthouse that day to relax, to unwind and to find peace. He particularly looks for a small spring which he has heard of but does not know where it is. According to Vernon Gras, scholars and academics who discuss ecological approaches in literature all agree that a new paradigm has to be ecocentric, and anthropocentric. “We need a holistic totalized vision that subordinates man to nature. Nature is viewed as a diverse living network functioning as a huge global organism becomes the ultimate value... A belief in a divine unity with which humans can identify becomes the basis for a more inclusive ethic or way of life that extends to non-human and non-living things” (Gras, 2001, p. 66). The description of Selahattin Bey’s mood and the calming and restful atmosphere of nature where he eventually leads himself to, foregrounds the connection he yearns for in order to nourish his body and his mind, in whose absence, he is afraid he will soon wither away and perish. This manifestation of the nature-man dichotomy in the narration undermines an anthropocentric view and moves toward the idea of man-nature interconnectedness and wholeness as presented in the passage below:

Selahattin Bey felt that a rejuvenating and strengthening fluid was flowing to his heart from all over his body. He took in a very deep breath and thought that he was going through a process of rebirth along with nature. Everything around him was coming to life once more: grass was springing out from the dead and muddy earth which was shaded by the deep dark leaves of olive branches, the barren and thin twigs of willows was turning into green and the scarce buds were promising leaves that would soon to cover these thin twigs...at that moment he had his hands scratched by the needles of the blackberries. He felt that the poison which gnawed him inside for so many years disappeared into thin air with the blood that appeared like a thin line which was to dry soon on his purple-veined hand that had a few light-brown hairs. He was so very much fresher and light-hearted at this moment. (Ali, 2019, p. 118, trans. mine)

As for Yusuf, he has one passion in life: his enduring love for Muazzez, his adopted sister. This love seems to be the only favorable thing in Yusuf’s life. His character traits which can remind similar patterns of natural events such as his outbursts of fury, his impromptu actions when Muazzez is involved have led the critics to draw similarities with the Romantic concept of “the noble savage” (cited in Moran, 2001, p. 18). “The author tries to create a balance between the material surrounding and life as a background exterior to the novel, and the characters, outside to this background, as adventurous characters in romances” (ibid.). The attributes of Yusuf that make him the noble savage are elements which give access to the ecocritical reading of the novel along with the artificiality of town life with its corrupt people as opposed to the misfit Yusuf

as wild and unruly as the nature itself possessing the innate innocence that looks so incongruous to the material background of the novel.

According to Moran, Yusuf's personality and character traits along with the structure of the novel which displays a romantic worldview are not contrary to the realistic depiction of small-town life and the conflict it brings about between the classes that inhabit it. Indeed, Moran claims that the author Ali adopts a romantic point of view even when he so realistically writes about small-town life in Anatolia. He goes on to say that the romantic love between Yusuf and Muazzez and the harsh realities of smalltown life create the opposing spaces in the story (2001, p. 18-19, trans. mine). Indeed, similar to this opposition, the theme of man/nature, natural man/material man, urban/ rural contrasts are juxtaposed in the structure of the novel to welcome ecocritical readings and interpretations by and large (Moran, 2001, p. 19, trans. mine).

Sabahattin Ali treats *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* novel as a realistic novel consisting of themes of small-town life styles and townspeople of mean intentions and limited worldviews. This aspect of the novel comes along with another aspect: the depiction of nature and the people that are connected to nature such as Selahattin bey and Yusuf himself as in the above excerpt from the novel. The contrast between nature and the townspeople appear as Ali's own outlook to the endangered and threatened, even destroyed naturalness and the natural environment due to the anthropocentric (man-centered) approach to the world and to humans who inhabit it. Selahattin bey and Yusuf react similarly to nature and the natural environment. In the scenes when Selahattin bey escapes to nature, nature is humanized in a way that provides solace to him, a human that Selahattin bey can connect with, but the town and the townspeople are as threatening to Selahattin Bey as they are to nature: "Selahattin Bey felt dizzy. He seemed to be lost amid the beautiful, warm and embracing nature. While looking around again, he saw the town below the hill which was beginning to be covered with purple smoke and he shuddered. He felt a sharp pain at the feeling of having to go there and be buried in that small ditch. But he refrained himself from pondering on that and hurried down the slope" (Ali, 2019, p. 119, trans. mine).

Similarly, the depiction of Yusuf's connection to nature displays parallel ecological thinking, which portrays nature as superior to other creatures in Yusuf's environment. Nature shares with Yusuf the Noble Savage, the same experience of pureness and freshness which are impossible to be shared with the other, with the other figures that belong to the town's population. In a passage that metaphorically portrays a shared experience between Yusuf and nature, the idea is better clarified:

Soon the moon was rising and lightening the ears of the animals at the front which were being fed. The bridge further away, the woods behind it and

the sea stretching at a distance suddenly came to life, the dull white light suddenly gave a new life to everything around... Nature expanding around under the scorching sun, which could only show a sign of living by means of light, transformed into a new spirit during a half-hour dark. This time it was manifesting signs of life by means of small movements and a tulle-like, all-encompassing breath of life... (Ali, 2019, p. 149, trans. mine)

W.J. Meeker defines the term literary ecology as “the study of biological themes and relationships which appear in literary works. It is simultaneously an attempt to discover what roles have been played by literature in the ecology of human species” (qtd. in Heidari, 2016, p. 63). In *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*, Sabahattin Ali portrays the mean and narrow-minded townspeople as equally destructive to humans and to ecological environment to the degree that ends in the devastation of some of the characters, as in the murder of Ali by the bully Şakir, or the death of Muazzez and the beginning of Yusuf’s self-exile at the end of the novel.

Sabahattin Ali’s ecological consciousness is displayed as an opposition between nature as the habitat of the natural, pureness and innocence and the town life as the habitat that breeds corruption in small-town people when they value materialistic things and economic comfort and capitalist pursuits. Hence, they are disconnected from nature, and from the order found in nature. In ecological criticism, nature is taken up with human attributes as opposed to the Anthropocene approach to nature which adopts a materialistic and egotistic worldview of nature. As mentioned by Heidari, “there is a symbiotic relationship between man and nature along with everything else in it, which flourishes and secures when man identifies the environmental issues and amend them for the sake of nature” (Heidari, 2016, p. 63). In *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*, environmental issues are forsaken by the townspeople for the benefit of satisfying their pleasures and greed, and those people like Yusuf and Selahattin Bey who are the odd ones out, cut themselves off from the society to the extent that the characters are overwhelmed by the desire of totally returning to nature and becoming the noble savage in opposition to the insensitivity towards nature as well as its dehumanization in attitude and in practice. At the end of the story, Yusuf, after a series of conflicts and criminal confrontations, and having buried his dead wife under a tree in the open space, rides his horse towards the mountains to start a new life: “After turning to look back at the town where he spent the worst years of his life and threateningly shaking his fist at it, he rode his horse forward, to the mountains ahead...” (Ali, 2019, p. 254, trans. mine).

As pointed out earlier in this paper, the portrayal of the relation between ecology, ecological concerns and literature has long been implanted into modern Turkish literature as early as in the 1930s in the form of regional topics and rural stories depicting the opposition between the rural peasant and the urban man in the face of modernization. In many of those works, what is voiced in terms of ecology

is the depiction of nature as another burden on the rural man, distracting and wasting him away in his struggles to make a living and to improve his lifestyle. This totally Anthropocene view of nature gradually begun to be challenged by ecosensitive authors such as Sabahattin Ali, and Yaşar Kemal as the most prominent representatives.

Nature and man's place in nature and his interaction with it is Yaşar Kemal's central concern in his novels and short stories. As in James Joyce's *Dublin*, Çukurova, an agricultural southern plain in Turkey, may as well be named as the cartographic focus in all his writings. In *Ortadirek*, (the Wind from the Plain) the first book of the *Dağın Öte Yüzü* (The Other Face of the Mountain) trilogy, Çukurova is the space for "the intellectual and emotional content of the narrative" (Tally, 2014, p. 1). In Yaşar Kemal, natural landscape and the narrative is so intertwined that landscape or the ecological environment becomes central to the effects and style of the narration. Ecological description and the narration are melted in one pot to create the impression that Kemal is not only dealing with the topics that concern man, but also with topics that specifically concern nature and its place in man's spiritual and physical journey. In his own words: "I believe in two things, the eternal force of two things, the infinite creativity, infinite change of two things: People and nature" (Özdemir, p. 3, trans. mine).

*Ortadirek* stands out as a fully ecologically sensitive novel comprising all the qualities that make a text available for an ecological reading. Starting by the title *Ortadirek* which means a pole or supporting column is actually a cultural object in Turkish. It is generally used by nomads when setting up a tent, but culturally it also stands for the father, or the head of a family who supports and protects his folks, represented by Uzun Ali, (tall Ali) in the novel. The novel, briefly stating, depicts a nomadic family's exodus from their village to find work, or in other words, to work as cotton workers in the plains of Çukurova. The journey is extremely challenging and trying in ruthless and harsh geography where nature is equipped with humanistic qualities of harshness, ruthlessness as well as beauty, naturalness, and innocence. The environment in the story creates the bulk of the plot in which characters act, live or disappear mentally or in blood and flesh, in relation to, or contrary to nature and the landscape that surrounds them. In Yaşar Kemal's own words, the influence of nature on mankind is explained as such: "I insist on integrating the setting within nature in my work because I am convinced that one can only attain truth by placing man in his primordial frame of reference" (in Kemal, 1999, p. 129).

Yaşar Kemal believes that there is a very strong primordial connection between man and nature which is actually inseparable, but, which also displays fury and anger at the instances when this bond, connection is under threat. The influence of the landscape and the ecological environment on man in Yaşar Kemal is vocalized by the Turkish author İlyaz Bingül in the following manner:

The interconnectedness of man and nature is a striking quality of Yaşar Kemal's novel. Man is a part of nature and in turn, nature is a prerequisite of the novel. We are encountering a novelistic quality which is not seen in any European novel. Man is inside nature; he acts not in the novel, but in nature. There is no paradox between what is 'human' and what is 'natural', nature is a unity comprised of a variety of plants, animals, humans, rivers that connect plains and mountains; and shapes of the earth. (İlyaz, 2005, trans. mine)

Indeed all his stories are shaped by the forces of nature and people, in a constant flux of conflict, harmony, placement, temporariness, safety, and unpredictability. Emin Özdemir writes the following about his focus on nature and the natural environment as dealt with in Yaşar Kemal's style:

Yaşar Kemal's literary creation is shaped by these forces. Their realism, the impact is driven from that, too. No matter how often it is said, it may as well be repeated once more; narrative creations which are not fed with the real and the reality can not be convincing, can not achieve artistic merit; because aren't all artistic creations whatever the genre may be, is an attempt at reshaping the truth, attaching new meanings to it? When evaluating YK's work from this angle we see that his work is fictionalized and produced in the bountiful earth of reality; and also that the reality of nature and the reality of humans are intertwined and transformed into the narrative reality. Briefly, in his creative universe nature is humanized and human has become an inseparable part of nature. Indeed mountains, stones, rocks, valleys, hills, downhill, insects, bugs, wolves birds enter the realm of narration like its internal elements; they assume the role of reflecting the emotional world of the characters... (Özdemir, 2019, p. 3-4, trans. mine)

These qualities that are mentioned in Özdemir are manifested in Kemal's narrative as such:

Now, rain must come. Just like then. Floods had taken over the pavilions. Somewhere there in the cotton field, further away, there was a wood of poplar trees. It was God's gift. Such woods, ten times the size of pine woods of Toros mountains. You will stand in front of it and say, there are three things in this Chukurova. A flat, straight meadow. Place an egg on this end, watch it on the other end. And a sea, which turns into purple, orange, turning into all colours, endless, vast, unidentified, unknown. Also this poplar tree woods. It is said that there is a stream behind it. Mighty. It is said that there are villages, dams, forests, fields, orangeries there. Vast. One can think the whole world is poplar tree woods, all the way to the sea, to the Toros mountains behind. You would say the whole world is poplar tree woods. Snakes, turtles in it. Hyenas, long-tailed wolves, coyotes with devil eyes. Unknown, invisible creatures... Fairies, spirits... (Kemal, 2004, p. 155, trans. mine)

The interconnectedness of the material and spiritual environment in the story with that of the human characters is displayed symbolically in the walnut tree metaphor in *Ortadirek*. Actually, the tree motif is a recurring device in Yaşar Kemal's fiction as a tool to explore and visualize his ecological stance and concerns. The walnut tree is symbolically an epitome of human being's spiritual and mental constitution such as his joy his agony, his longings, and yearnings. The narration and the figures of speech glorify this connection as seen in the passage below:

I was passing under this holywalnut tree one night, pitch dark, bulletproof night. Its branches were shuffling. They were like dark water. The walnut had invaded the whole sky. Suddenly something cracked. I turned around to look, a ball of light from the earth was flowing towards the walnut, while doing so the branches were lightning, bathing in light, soaking in light. I was frozen then and there. I kept praying. Soon the twigs of the walnut, its leaves, its trunk, the whole tree were struck by light as if carving the night thru. Then with the branches, with its trunk, the walnut spread towards the sky, expanded against the mountains opposite. The whole world lightened up, like day break. The darkness of the mountains cleared, the darkness of the night lifted. (Kemal, 2004, p. 111, trans. mine)

In this passage above, Uzun Ali, the main character and the father of the family is soliloquizing. He encounters a magical moment in the deepest moment of the night when he feels the loneliest and the most desperate in the course of the events confronted in the devastating journey in the Toros (Taurus) mountains. The 'light' motif which turns the experience into a cosmic one moves beyond the material environment and mixes with the spiritual and imaginative landscape of man.

Nature is endowed with human qualities and is held responsible for the sufferings and misery of man and also for his joy and happiness. Another major character in the novel, Meryemce, Uzun Ali's mother who displays a perseverant and resilient front against the hardships amid the poverty and mishaps in the family's life pours her heart out to the woods around her:

Woods, hey woods she began. Happy woods, a hundred thousand trees you are, you cannot move, you cannot separate. You thunder all together, you fall your leaves altogether, you root down to the earth altogether. You stand to blossom altogether, you froze altogether. Same rain falls on you, same day shines on you. The same scent you smell, same fire knocks you down. I address you, only you, be grateful that you are not human. Be grateful, although you can not sing, sleep, wake up, nor kiss or cuddle but all the same, be grateful. (Kemal, 2004, p. 245, trans. mine)

Another instance is when she is glorifying nature and its nurturing and accommodating force and cursing her bad fate for being created as a human being:

Hey you tiniest of stars above me. Whose star are you? Who knows where your master is. In which plain, in which meadow or mountain he is. Or maybe asleep in his warm bed, devoid of trouble or worries. Or maybe he is wide awake, deep in thousands of troubles, pain, wounds and scars, wriggling and moaning. I know, when he dies, you will fall off the sky... your heart is big, you are as cool as valleys, all creations find happiness in you, find shelter in you, trees stuck your bosom, waters carve you through, thunder finds you, all sorts of untold misfortunes befall on you, but all the same, be grateful that you are not man. (Kemal, 2004, p. 245, trans. mine)

Nature in Yaşar Kemal's *Ortadirek* is also a metaphorical touchstone in humans' character traits and the constitution are tested against. The hill, in the novel that the characters Ali, Meryemce, Elif and the children keep climbing is personified with adverse qualities that put obstacles in their toilsome journey towards Çukurova plains. Hence, nature and the ecological environment, as seen in Sabahattin Ali's *Kuyucaklı*, becomes another character in the story with human qualities and which enable the action to be dramatized and developed. The excerpt below clarifies this point:

Elif woke up first. ... She kept thinking. Thinking and watching the unfathomable hill. The face of the hill was crumbly. It had a purplish colour. It had green patches scattered around, turning into red and light blue. A path of thin line coiling around like a white line was going upwards, withering away in the blueness of the sky.

It was a dark purple in the dusk. Then the sun came out. Colours emerged. The hill sunk in the light.

There was no way but to stay there. Ali could never climb this hill with Meryemce on his back. Neither could Meryemce spare even one step. Maybe she was dead...

The bird with its wings, the snake with its back no matter what could not climb this hill. And when exhausted, nobody could climb it. She could not take her eyes off the hill. She stood just like that watching the hill. What to do? How to do? If only there was no hill, then all their misery and pain on the road would not have been in vain. Goddamn hill. Did you have to be there? Just when the road had finished and they were about to reach Çukurova...

She counted her fingers. Closed her eyes. Her arms dropped to her sides in great despair. She sat down on a rock nearabouts. The hill began to get lost in a haze. It grew. This hill can never be overtaken... (Kemal, 2004, p. 322-323, trans. mine)

As it is seen in the examples above, nature and the environment described so warmly and dramatically, are embedded in the novel not as an assortment or an element where the action takes place but as an active participant that comes to

life as the other characters. In Özdemir's words, "Yaşar Kemal is the mouthpiece of nature and the human heart" (2019, p. 14-15, trans. mine).

In the two novels discussed in this paper nature and the ecological environment are humanized and become the mental landscapes in which the human spirit is challenged, confronted, or finds solace and peace. Nature is in binding interaction with the humans in the novels and displays a connection between humans and itself. The contextualization of nature in the plots creates the mental landscapes of the characters as well. The characters exist, always and at all instances in these novels, so far as they interact with nature favorably or unfavorably. Thus, both *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* and *Ortadirek* manifest the strong argument of Turkish authors in their endeavor to reflect how they oppose the anthropocentric view which undermines nature's singularity and which relegates it to an inferior place in the context of man's superiority and wellbeing.

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