

РЕГИОНАЛНОТО И ПРОВИНЦИАЛНОТО В ТУРСКИЯ РОМАН:
ЗА “ORTADIREK” (“СРЕДЕН СЪЛЪБ“) НА ЯШАР КЕМАЛ
Н. Берин Аксой

THE REGIONAL AND THE PROVINCIAL IN THE TURKISH NOVEL:
THE CASE OF YAŞAR KEMAL'S *ORTADIREK* (*THE WIND FROM
THE PLAIN*)

N. Berrin Aksoy, Atılım University, Turkey

Abstract *The aim of this study is to discuss the characteristic aspects of the Turkish regional novel taking Yaşar Kemal's novel Ortadirek (The Wind from the Plain) as an example, in terms of its ability to refer to universality between man and nature while featuring a particular geographical venue and a particular local people who inhabits this region.*

Key words *regional novel, local colour, universality, man and nature*

Regionality in Turkish literature developed with the development of Turkish novel especially in the mid-20th century. It is a known fact that Modern Turkish novel evolved in the 19th century during the Reformation Era in the Ottoman Empire and in line with the modernization initiatives, but nearly a century had to pass for the Turkish novel to embrace a social and distinctive tone as well as to develop characteristics of its own. The emphasis upon the rural and the native against cosmopolitanism in the Turkish novel may not be as sharp as those in the American or the French novels of the same periods. The hints at a deeper interest in the identity and struggles of the regional man as opposed to the man in a big town or city provided the Turkish authors with a convenient venue in which to expand and elaborate his / her subject-matter and narrative. This interest in the local colour with a geographical scope as well as its cultural reflections in terms of concrete and abstract issues was made manifest through the presence of local characters in the narrative. The important thing about the Turkish regional novel is that, while the treatment and subject matter have a universal dimension, the geographical elements contribute to create profundity which contain social criticism and everyday topics. On the other hand, regionalism in Western novels especially in the American novel is seen as limited and anti-universal, which is voiced by Scott Herring in his quotation from Duvall as such:

While we should be wary of collapsing metropolitanism with modernism and regionalism with ruralism, this scenario remains commonplace in contemporary literary criticism. Conflated with a quaint local color, “regionalism” thus figures as an antiquated and effeminized (dainty, delicate, minute, skimpy) literary form that international modernisms eclipsed, and

despite the rich recent scholarship on regionalism's complex formations, its movements can often seem antimodernist at best, the "antithesis" to modernist studies at worst (qtd. in Herring, 2009: 3)

My argument in this paper is that the Turkish local, or regional novel embraces modernist elements contrary to its American counterpart. The modernist techniques of narration, the focus on the individual's senses and imaginative faculties; the style and stylistic elements in the Turkish regional novels echo a parallelism with modernist tendencies without excluding realist elements in its affinity with social criticism and, a realistic portrayal of the condition of the rural man in a very real geographical location and time span. In that sense Turkish regional novel may also be regarded as provincial novel, and one of its leading representative is Yaşar Kemal.

Before delving into the regional and provincial qualities of Yaşar Kemal novels, it may be worthwhile to say a few things about this major Turkish novelist. According to Handan İnci in her article "Türkiye'nin toplumsal hafızası Yaşar Kemal'e Veda" (A Farewell to Yaşar Kemal, the collective consciousness of Turkey) (March 2015, *Milliyet Sanat*), labels that go by Yaşar Kemal are Anatolia, Çukurova region, epic, story, province etc. These are some of the qualities of his novels but of course his novels are much more than those. Yaşar Kemal is regarded as a canonical Turkish author who has established a fresh breath of style and narrative techniques in the Turkish novel while at the same time transferring the spirit of the old epics and narratives into the modern novel (qtd. in İnci, 2015). According to Orhan Pamuk, Yaşar Kemal's strength sprang from the child within who could not be killed by any sort of evil, jealousy, threat or antagonism (qtd. in İnci, 2015) His local focus was the Çukurova region (Mediterranean) mainly, but for Selim İleri he could not be regarded as solely provincial since he wrote about metropolitans towards the last phase of his authorship (qtd. in İnci, 2015). According to Semih Gümüş, his greatness came from his ability to probe into the universal roots of the feelings of hope, rebellion, sorrow, joy, fear and agony (qtd. in İnci, 2015). From all the comments above, Handan İnci concludes that one can easily infer that Yaşar Kemal is the first native novelist who has succeeded to become a universal author as well. She goes on to say that, the essence that enlivens Yaşar Kemal's novels is mainly his love of nature which is the unifying element. The relationship he establishes between the noble person and nature and the elegy he sings for the forsaken and devastated nature are the main themes of his which are to be passed on to the generations to come (İnci, 2015). His novels are loaded with the passionate love he feels towards birds, flowers, trees, plants and his fury against evil (İnci, 2015). In Kemal's own words;

The World is a culture garden with a thousand and one flowers. Until the onset of armed imperialism, cultures have nourished each other everywhere, and so have civilizations. I would like to cite the example of the Mediterranean. This is a place where a thousand and one flowers blend. The Mediterranean region has a cultural diversity rarely seen elsewhere in the World. When we look at

history, we can see how transportation has created miracles... (Kemal, 2007)

The cultural diversity Kemal mentions is parallel to the diversity of nature he finds in the Çukurova region. There are countless birds, trees, flowers, grass, bugs and all sorts of creatures of nature in his beloved Çukurova where all these animate objects are displayed in flesh and blood in the overall fabric of the narrative; they form the unity and the integrity of his characters in the plot almost to a degree of universality. The geographical and regional characteristics and plantation do not exist in Kemal's novels for the sake of local colour; they are the links that connect man to nature, to universe, in the confinement of a particular time and place. Nor are the flowers, trees, bugs and all the creatures the same or uniform; they display all the peculiarities of diversity just like the human beings that they encircle. In his own words:

Now our World is in trouble. We are rushing toward an age in which a single culture is poised to prevail. This will deprive humanity of its human dignity. Let us try to imagine what humanity will look like under the domination of a single culture humanity will be hostage to a single flower, to a single color, to a single scent... and to a single language. (Kemal, 2007)

In Yaşar Kemal's novels, regional quality or provincialism, as is mentioned above, a complementary characteristic of human beings.

This juxtaposition of man and nature in his novels are best described in his own words:

In my novels, a fundamental theme is how humans face new conditions and how nature is transformed as society changes. This aspect of human experience has always fascinated me. In my land of the Chukurova, the forests, the swamps, and the reed beds disappeared in a few years – as if a magic wand had been waved over the land. This was the work of the introduction of the tractor in 1949... Nature's destruction is a great danger to humanity. With changes in the ecosystem, our own nature change too – witness the unbalanced people who have appeared. The people of the Chukurova plain that I once knew no longer have the wholeness of former times (Kemal, 2007)

This excerpt from Kemal's 2007 speech in Lillehammer University College, displays his unifying vision of man and nature, their complementary wholeness and how the balance and harmony is undone when either of them is harmed.

It is true that the focal point of region in Yaşar Kemal's novels is Chukurova, as he himself puts forth. In his recitations, Chukurova, or Cilicia is one of the world's most fertile lands. In his Norway speech, he underlines the roots of his epic style which appropriates all the regional and universal characteristics into an inseparable whole and which surrounds almost all his narratives as in the following manner:

I grew up in a land where the remnants of the epic tradition survived. My masters are those who passed on the oral literature of my country. But Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Gogol and Dickens are also part of my roots... I came from the language of epics and tales and knew the power of language. I was a folklorist

in my youth. That helped me a lot in my work. Wouldn't you agree that in Faulkner's work the traditions and customs of his land have their place?... We carry traditions in our blood, so to speak. Men are attached to the values they have created in their homelands. Humanity does the same with its attachment to the values it imposes on itself and that we label "universal". (Kemal, 2007)

Hence, the universality of the attachment to regionalism and to the values it brings about and its connection with the human being is described in the profound expressions of his own recitation. In that sense, the novel *Ortadirek* (*The Wind from The Plain*) serves as a microcosm where the above themes and narrative techniques achieve the highest quality. Fethi Naci writes the following about *Ortadirek*.

Ortadirek is the best Turkish novel I have read so far. I do not remember any such flesh and blood and detailed depiction of the Turkish man who lived under certain conditions and who belonged to a fixed historical and social time; or any such vivid, rich, alive depiction of the nature in any of our novels (Naci, trsl. mine)

All throughout the novel you do not see, but feel, the author's vast knowledge of the region he tells about, like an iceberg under the water. For that reason his characters are not flat unlike other provincial novels. (Naci, trsl. mine)

The antagonist in the novel is the road. In fact, this echoes the road in Ben Okri's novel *The Famished Road*. The metaphorical quality of the road in both novels is allegorical as well. It is the force that works against the humans. It is devouring; devastating and extremely challenging:

Meryemdje's hands dropped to her sides." Well, you've caught up now my daughter," she said despondently. She felt so exhausted that it was as though she no longer had any body, feet or arms. She took two steps forward." You've caught up, as you see" she repeated and her voice was so bitter and hopeless that Elif's eyes filled with tears. Meryemdje's face frightened her. It had taken on the ashen hue of sick people nearing death (Kemal, 1989: 107)

In the novel, Meryemdje is the main character and the mother, grandmother and mother-in-law of the family. The family sets out to reach Chukurova on foot, in the hope of finding work and shelter there. It is the hope of almost all Chukurova peasants. Cotton collection is the sole occupation on plains and the nearly famished family has undertaken the challenge of reaching there on foot. Meryemdje in that sense is the epitome of the strong, wilful Anatolian woman who is at the same time helpless in the hand of social and regional conditions. All throughout the journey the road to Chukurova is alive as much as Meryemdje and her family and the struggle to overcome one another is the metaphorical motif of the universal theme of the connection of man and nature. On the one hand Meryemdje and her family can only exist as long as they are nourished by the Chukurova soil; on the other hand, they are confronted with the threat of being destroyed by the steep and indomitable road that leads to Chukurova:

Meryemdje's inner dialogue is as follows:

How many days is it from here to Chukurova, she wondered. She counted in her mind all the stops on the road. The ascents, the dark forests, the black streams barring the way, the graveyards beside the road, the Tiger's Crag... People have heard huge tigers with fangs of flame roaring on this crag. They say that these tigers snap a man's head right off his body. And then there's the Forsaken Graveyard, long and dark and terrifying, its gravestones aslant and untended... (Kemal, 1989: 189)

The dichotomy of nature on Chukurova plains and human nature are at once in harmony and in conflict. The conflict is ever present in the journey, in the form of the road and the travel motif. It is depicted like another character in the story and, as a living thing which is evil and beautiful at the same time:

The first rays of the sun would soon be lighting up the slopes of the mountain opposite, which seemed to be drawing a deep breath and stretching itself as it awaited the warm bright day. With its yellow, red, greenish-blue, mauve-circled, luminous-winged wild bees, its long-legged ants crowding about the entrances of their holes, its eagles, one-eye always open, nestling in their eyries, its cloud-white mountain-doves huddling together in a single hollow, its savage hawks and falcons, its thousands of ladybirds filling the ball-shaped thistles that are called fairies' nests, its mountain goats and timorous jackals, its foxes, their long red tails tossing like flames, its soft purple bears lying full-length in their winter sleep over the withered yellow leaves, its springing sad deer, their languid eyes like those of a love-lorn girl, its worms, its large and small birds, with all its creatures above the earth and beneath it, the mountain lay, with bared breast and open mouth, waiting for the warm sun to strike its flanks (Kemal, 1989: 135)

The description of the mountain at daybreak, with all the bugs, birds, eagles, bees etc. waiting for the sun to rise is a new day with new hopes and aspirations for the mankind and for Meryemdje and her family on the road. However, on the other hand, the mountain is also the metaphor for the roads to be taken, to be walked and conquered in order to arrive in Chukurova.

The same description of the mountain evokes feelings of dread and helplessness in Ali, Meryemdje's son:

The sun first lighted the space of a threshing floor on the mountain slope. Then the light crept down into the valley. Two ants at the entrance to their nest groped at each other lengthily with their feelers before crawling off in opposite directions. The sun then touched Ali's forehead and he woke up, but for a while he could not gather his thoughts and remember where he found himself. Then his eyes rested on the peak of the mountain and a heavy pain settled within him like salt water... (Kemal, 1989: 136)

Within the diachronic relation of the region and the humans existing in it, one cannot ignore Yaşar Kemal's vision of the complementary and unifying relationship between man and nature, which is expressed as such in *Ortadirek*:

He plucked the dried stalk of an autumn asphodel and broke off its end. A tiny bee buzzed out in a flash of blue. Then he slit the stalk into two. It was filled with honey which he started lapping up with his tongue. He broke

another stalk, then another and another. The honey had a strange acrid taste that went to his head. It carried the smell of new, green herbs. Drunk with sleep and honey, it seemed to Ali that all the scents of the mountain were flowing through his veins (Kemal, 1989: 136)

The smell of mountain is flowing in Ali's blood at that moment of heightened feelings of dread, anguish and bliss. The above passages show the contradictory, challenging and even antagonistic relationship between nature and man while displaying also the inseparable, unifying and complementary relationship between the two. For Yaşar Kemal, to most convenient medium for expressing this vision is the novel genre:

I have always believed in the power of the word. The Word is one of the most important values created by man, the great magic that binds us so powerfully to life. And the novel is the most powerful of the verbal arts. In any novel, the reader re-creates the novel from beginning to end. If there is an olive tree in the novel, the olive tree in the reader's garden takes its place in the novel... A novel lives on because of this process of certain. (Kemal, 2007)

Chukurova region is the dominant motif of nature in Yaşar Kemal's novels. It is his joy and his grief simultaneously, likewise for his characters in *Ortadirek* in his own words:

And my main grief is with nature. All my life nature has been a close companion. The Chukurova is the endless plain where I was born, the Taurus are the mountains where we spent five summer months each year. In the Taurus mountains, the forests, the flowers, the clouds, the springs, the fruit, they are all legendary. No forest scent is like those of the Taurus. Life in the Taurus is a joy. Unfortunately, the Taurus forests are depleted as fast as many other forests of our World. (Kemal, 2007)

To conclude, regionalism depicted as in Yaşar Kemal, one of the major authors in Turkish Literature and who is also a representative of provincial or regional novel in Turkey, is a metaphorical entity. For Yaşar Kemal, the Chukurova region becomes a site where he can explore the universal and timeless relationship between human beings and nature without suggesting the negative characteristics of the provincial setting, associated with the word "provincial". It is the force, and the element that binds man to nature and it is an object to express the harmonious unifying as well as the antagonistic relationship between man and nature.

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