Like Iskander, many were educated in Moscow and either write in Russian or depend on Russian translation for wider circulation. However, Soviet influence, censorship, and power over publication have not resulted in a leveling approach, despite the common setting of an ancient culture in conflict with modern outside forces. The ethnic diversity of the region, the shared Islamic heritage notwithstanding, gives rise to a variety of expressions. Among them, the voice of Iskander will always be distinct and questing.

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1. The two English volumes of the Chegem series were published by Random House in 1983 and 1984.

TURKISH

The Turkish Peasant Novel, or the Anatolian Theme

By GUZINE DINO

Is there a peasant novel genre, or are there simply novels with a dominant peasant theme? To the numerous possible classifications which have appeared in the history of the novel—the picaresque novel, the historical novel, the popular novel, the social novel, the roman à thèse, the proletarian novel, et cetera—it is possible in the case of Turkish literature to speak of a "peasant novel," with its particular characteristics, flaws, and great merits. If Hegel's celebrated and oft-cited definition of the Western novel as "a modern bourgeois epic, designed to express the conflict between the poetry of the heart and the prose of social relations" (Asthétik) is to a certain extent still valid, it could not easily be applied to the emergence of the art of the peasant novel in Turkey, which is the subject of this study and which takes as its setting the Anatolian region and its inhabitants. But whereas Hegel's definition does not seem quite applicable in this instance, Stendhal's, on the other hand, is illuminating: "A mirror carried along a path." In this case, the novelistic mirror is carried along the great paths of the Anatolian steppes, revealing the problematic condition of the peasants, people whose destiny bears almost no resemblance to that of the men and women who make up the living fabric of the Western novel.

The genre which might be called the peasant novel in Turkey appeared around 1949–50 with the publication of a number of works by young novelists of peasant stock, most of whom had been trained in the so-called village institutes, which I will discuss later in this essay. The first and most famous of them, Mahmud Makal (b. 1930), was to write Bıçim Kıyı (Our Village; 1950), the story of Makal's misadventures as a teenage schoolteacher in his own village but also a merciless portrayal of peasant conditions in Turkey. The little book's almost anthropological account of a village on the Anatolian plateau not only had an explosive impact on both political and literary circles but also possessed the added merit of establishing a literary style that was at once dramatic and unadorned. With Makal, it was not so much the novel itself that was important as it was that his concise, expressive style offered an excellent model of fiction for young peasants with literary talent.

The most important and clearly the most popular novel to come out of the village culture was Yashar Kemal's İnce Memed (1955; Eng. Memed, My Hawk), which has had, and continues to have, numerous print-
ings in Turkey and in many other countries, giving the Turkish novel a worldwide audience. Following its publication, dozens of young novelists with a similar background began to write novels and short stories inspired by what they knew better than anyone: the village and its daily life, its dramas, and its passions. Fakir Baykurt, Talip Apaydın, Lütfi Ay, and Dursun Akşam, to name just a few, were to form the nucleus of the "peasant novel," opening new perspectives for the novelistic genre in Turkey.

Whatever literary qualities these works displayed or lacked, this novelistic discovery of the village by Turkish readers, city dwellers for the most part, had the undeniable merit of revealing the emotional world, the social conflicts, the language, and the images of the rural majority. The extraordinarily rich vocabulary, the expressive verbal structure, the vivid and evocative language, and the lively dialogues made a major contribution to the development of Turkish literature, guiding or supporting attempts to purify and transform the language of contemporary Turkey, which was undergoing a process of great change. By helping to bring about the divorce between the modern idiom and the old Ottoman language (which was filled with Arabic and Persian words), this new genre contributed to the democratization of the Turkish language and of Turkish literature.

Despite the immense talent of the peasant authors, this novelistic current was not the result of spontaneous generation, a genre devoid of history or roots. The literary focus on the peasantry and the desire to purify the language go further back than the 1950s.

One of the very first literary works to concern itself with the Turkish peasantry was Kara Bibik (1890), an unfinished narrative which drew its inspiration from the French naturalistic movement. Written by Nabizade Nazım, it describes the life of a peasant from the Antalya region and is less a novel than an attempt at one. Another work of some significance by the same writer, Küşük Paşa (The Little Pasha), which dates from 1910, tells the story of a mother and son living in an Anatolian village. The author, who was a governor, a minister, and later a deputy, weighs his narrative with numerous speeches in order to present his ideas on country schools, village health, and other matters. It is less a novel than a proctext to lecture, but it is not without merit.

The Turkish village did not really become the focus of novelists' interest until the War of Independence (1919–23), led by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who managed to rally all the life forces of the nation: numerous civilian and military intellectuals, and especially peasant soldiers, who continued to have faith in their commander, the man who had led the nation to victory in the Battle of the Dardanelles Straits in 1915.

The city of Ankara had become the center of the armed struggle. Writers, novelists, poets, and jour-
were they afraid of me. Especially this innkeeper, this individual who looked like a bandit. If he had come here two or three hundred years ago, he would certainly have laid down the law. An individual who does not bow to destiny, who cares nothing about the whole world. In his own universe, he has seen and endured many things, overcome numerous worries and misfortunes. But then again, my driver’s no better. He’s a young boy, but he has bloodshot eyes; he looks at you like a bird of prey perched on a rock.

Eşenval was also to write, in his fine, nuanced, undated style, stories in which he denounced the inner workings of the patriarchal system in the villages, for there was injustice not only in the relations between city and village but also within each village.

Whereas Eşenval expresses his observations by purposely distancing himself, Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1899–1974) brings to the description of the realities of village life the subjectivity of a city dweller grappling with his anguished failure to communicate with those living around him. Although he understands why he is cut off from the others, he cannot help feeling tremendous bitterness. His celebrated novel Yaban (The Outsider), published in 1932, is the story of an officer whose arm has been amputated and who decides to live out the rest of his life in a settlement located on a remote steppe. His personal misfortune is aggravated by the foreign occupation of the country in 1919. The work is thus a novel about despair, for the disabled officer, living in voluntary exile, is considered a yaban, an outsider, by the peasants. Despite all his efforts, communication is never established between the ex-officer, an intellectual from another world, and the peasants living out their own drama. The mistrust which the author senses stems from centuries of virtual slavery. Through his identification with the protagonist of his novel, and through his personal commentary, Karaosmanoğlu indulges in what amounts to self-criticism in the form of direct discourse, establishing the historical guilt of the intelligentsia, which had hitherto ignored its own country and the immense majority of its inhabitants.

If “The Outsider” contains many novelistic elements which were new to Turkish literature, it nonetheless retains the didactic quality characteristic of the novelists who were responsible for the birth of the genre in the second half of the nineteenth century. Still, it has many fine qualities, due largely to the author’s sincerity and his desire to create a coherent novelistic style. Karaosmanoğlu’s talent is revealed in his description of places, people, and situations, the very differences which form the barrier between the village world and that of the city.

And the road is long. If you ask the villagers, they will say, “It’s very close by, but I know what “very close by” means to a villager. The nearest point indicated by “very close by” is five or six hours down the road. Why is it they have no notion of time or space? As the days go by, I find my own answer. The reason is this: even in myself I feel that since I arrived here, the notion of time has diminished considerably. The first few days I forgot what day of the week it was. Now I no longer keep track of the months; all I notice is the change of seasons. The day I forget my age and the past on which I’ve turned my back, I will feel indescribable relief. But even when I reach that state, I will not escape the frightening feeling these immense, dry plains awaken in me: this feeling oppresses me continually; it makes me dizzy and destroys my will. But a village in the middle of the desert does not even offer the assurance of a stage. A stage marks a point of departure in the middle of Space. If you are here today, you will reach an oasis tomorrow; the day after tomorrow the waters of a large river will flow forward to meet you. Maybe a village, a village in Anatolia represents a stage fixed in time. Space here seems to swallow you up. In the middle of this space you feel a numbing terror. Truly, in this village which resembles Hittite ruins, what difference is there between the men and the statues that have just been exhumed?”

The anguish described by Karaosmanoğlu is similar to Eşenval’s. These two talented writers, the cream of the Turkish intelligentsia of their time, experience the same fear and anguish, one that is not only physical, but moral and intellectual as well.

These feelings of surprise, fear, and anguish seem no longer to be an issue in the writings of Sahahattin Ali (1906–48). Ali goes beyond the mea culpa of someone like Karaosmanoğlu to denounce in virulent terms the social structure that the reader discovers and understands better in his stories. His work marks a turning point in the development of the Turkish novel; the reality he depicts is a more global vision: the crisis of a whole society. In his story “The Oxcart,” a watershed piece in Turkish literature, he tells of an Anatolian peasant woman whose son was killed by the son of the agha (rich peasant) of the village. The mother is urged not to file a complaint: “What would you gain by it?” asked the imam. “Who do you think would testify against the agha’s son and say he was a murderer? . . . It was God’s will. You aren’t going to use a court to go against God’s will, now, are you?” When the police arrive, “Mehmet the Blond’s mother did not say anything. She simply repeated, ‘I am not filing a complaint against anyone.’ . . . Mervout agha had bought her silence with two milk goats, a sack of flour, and a bag of sugar.” The idea of having to deal with government officials seems to her worse still than the death of her son, but the police force her to bring her son’s exhumed corpse to the city in her oxcart.

The oxcart, which moved along slowly on wheels that screeched more loudly than jackals howling in the shimmering summer moonlight, did not look as though it were carrying a corpse. In this light, which outlined the backbone of the oxc, the animals seemed powerful and full of life: the patched quilt and the worm-eaten cart seemed as beautiful and new as if they had been made of an extraordinarily precious metal. . . . And the woman staggered along. She wanted to cry out to the oxen to halt, but no sound came out. Her hands let go of the cart and she stumbled to the ground. She picked herself up from the dust and began to run. . . . Her bandana floated behind her like a black flag. Before she caught up with the cart, she fell again, face-down in the path, in dust as white and fine as ash.
Then, bumping along, tossing the tied-down corpse here and there, wheels screeching in a wall that was now drawn out, now muffled in the moonlight, trailing a light halo of dust behind it in the silence of the night, the cart continued slowly on its way.

This grandiose image symbolizes centuries of powerless resignation and submission, that of a world cut adrift, allowed to go its own way.

The perspective of critical realism which Sabahattin Ali introduces into his vision of Turkish peasant life is revealed as well in his novel Kuyucakli Yusuf (Yusuf the Taciturn; 1937), in which an Anatolian village is dissected in terms of its social life, its prejudices, and its obscurantism, revealing the abuses and corruption of the administration. The story revolves around the son of a peasant who, following the murder of his parents in the village, is taken in and later adopted by the subprefect and eventually marries the latter's daughter. The orphaned Yusuf has trouble adapting to the corruption around him. The network of special interests in the village, the pettiness of the officials, the transformation of the women into objects of decision—all these make his revolt appear socially motivated, even if he himself seems unaware of it.

Sabahattin Ali, like Balzac, Stendhal, and so many other great realists, understood that an essential part of the reality of a given society becomes crystallized in provincial life, which in turn mirrors the realities of big-city life. Refat Nuri Güntekin (1886–1956), in his famous novel Caklusu (The Petty King) of 1922 and in Yeşil Gecce (The Green Night) of 1928, had already taken up the subject of provincial life, but he was content to describe the antiquated customs, the obstinate ignorance, the bigoted fanaticism of life in a small town, and schoolteachers’ desperate battles against the kind of reactionary thinking which opposed all attempts at change—in sum, a Kemalist struggle, an attempt to reform an archaic system and mentality that had existed for centuries.

By denouncing and criticizing the very structures of a society in which the power of the privileged classes seems to go unquestioned, Sabahattin Ali imparted to his work a social dimension that is without precedent in the art of the Turkish novel. Here is the closing passage of “Yusuf the Taciturn,” where melodrama is woven into the fabric of daily life:

After contemplating the town, Yusuf gazed at the hill rising before him. He clenched his fists and bit his lip, but could not hold back the big tears that began to roll down his cheeks, blinding him. He wiped his eyes with his sleeves and leaped into the saddle. He turned around once more, and, shaking his fist at the small town where he had spent the most terrifying years of his existence, he galloped off toward the mountain.

In spite of the distress and pain which filled his soul, he would not surrender. He would share his grief with no one, he would shoulder this burden alone and would give his life a new direction.

It is clear that the stage is set for Memed, My Hawk by Yashar Kemal, that other famous rebel.

Before the emergence of the peasant novelists in the 1950s, however, there were, following Sabahattin Ali, other writers who would help prepare the way for a new vision of the Anatolian people and their lives, developing situations and characters using techniques inspired by realism to explore human relations. In successive cross sections, entire segments of Turkish society were revealed to the eye of the spectator-reader in works which sometimes went beyond the scope of literature to provide sociological insights not to be found elsewhere. Although some works were vitiated by this orientation, the trend was inevitable; the rapid pace of social change gave rise to a certain didacticism, creating a new form of bildungsroman. This quest for identity was to pose numerous problems, some of which were ideological.

For one thing, the Republican government declared itself populist while refusing to give up its elitist attitude of state control. Popular expression was accepted and encouraged in the form of folklore, but it was denied and repressed whenever it took up anything involving social change. Therefore, artists who sought to give a true image of society had to tread a narrow path. The ideologists of the sole party (the Republican People’s Party) had decreed that Turkey would be a “classless society”; so it was at great personal risk that writers sought to explore the more conflictual aspects of reality, particularly if they wanted to depict the patriarchal structure of the village, which was morally and materially in the hands of the most influential men, and the exorbitant power that the large landowners and the agha held over the poor, landless peasant. It was a contrast that was almost Manichean in nature; but it was real, and it was played out in the theatre of village life day after day, in total contradiction to the idyllic picture painted by the administration.

Although it would be impossible to list all the urban writers who sought to understand the condition of the Turkish peasantry, I would like to mention a few of the most interesting ones.

- Sadri Erdem (1900–43). After participating as a youth in the War of Independence, he became a journalist, then began working for the Republican government and was eventually elected as a deputy to the National Assembly. His collections of stories reveal a caustic and independent spirit, which is already apparent in the title of his first collection, “The Peasant in Top Hat” (1933).

- Kemal Tahir (1910–73). After training as a navy officer, he was sentenced in 1939 to a long prison term, which was to be a determining factor in his becoming a writer, for he was befriended by the great poet Nazım Hikmet while in the Cankiri prison. He published a collection of stories in 1941, then a novel, Köyün Kam- buryu (The Village Hunchback; 1959), and numerous other novels analyzing the customs and traditions of peasant life. These works, which he wrote before turning to the historical novel and other genres, represented an important contribution to Anatolian literature.
• Abidine Dino (b. 1913). A painter by trade, Dino wrote and published the play Kel (The Bald Man) in 1942, while living under surveillance in Adana. Although the work was immediately censored, it did enjoy a certain clandestine distribution. It features a great variety of characters whose vocabulary bears the stamp of the peasant idiom as well as many poetic elements of popular expression. Rich in contrastive social elements, it was read by later peasant writers.

• Reşat Enis (1909–82). This writer, who was on the editorial staff of a newspaper in Adana during the years 1942–44, published the novel Toprak Kokusu (The Smell of the Earth) in 1944, revealing an extensive knowledge of the large landowners of the Shukur-Ova region as well as of the problems of the impoverished peasantry.

• Orhan Kemal (1914–70). Orhan Kemal’s career as a writer was determined by his incarceration in the prison at Bursa, where, like Kemal Tahir, he was encouraged by the poet Nazım Hikmet to write prose. He decided to remain in Adana when he was released from prison in 1942. Already in his first work, the story collection Ekmek Katgani (The Battle for Bread; 1949), he portrayed the drama of young peasants who try to flee the village and adapt to city life. He sought to document this difficult transition from village life to that of the industrial centers.

This list of writers who prepared the ground for the emergence of the peasant novelists is far from exhaustive, but I would be particularly remiss if I did not add further mention of the major contribution made by the imprisoned poet Nazım Hikmet, for he was to write between 1941 and 1945 a poem comprising several thousand verses (actually a prose poem or poetic prose) and published in five volumes, Memleketinden İnsan Manzaraları (Human Landscapes; 1966–67), for which he claims to have drawn inspiration from the works of William Langland, Gogol, and Tolstoy. With this poem, Hikmet sought to break down the barriers between poetry and prose in order to create a new genre capable of depicting his century and those living through it both in Turkey and elsewhere. Peasant themes play a major role in the poem, which brims over with the most diverse situations taken from the War of Independence as well as from the conflicts of daily life in and out of prison; landscapes are depicted along with the people who inhabit them—people driven by love, crime, and passion.

They who are numberless,
like ants in the earth,
fish in the water,
birds in the air,
they who are cowardly,
courageous,
ignorant
and wise,
they who are children
they who begin anew,
and who create,
our book will recount only their adventures.

This great poem, which in the course of its composition was passed from hand to hand, circulated outside the prison, and read by a considerable number of people, was important both for its stylistic perfection and the poet’s determination to avoid the pitfalls of a superficial kind of realism. “The danger is to schematize,” he wrote in a letter to Kemal Tahir.

Whatever the merits, qualities, and flaws of these precursors of the peasant novel, their works alone do not suffice to explain the force and vitality which was to characterize the development of the genre. Despite the limited scope of the populist movement and of the reforms carried out during the first years of Kemalism, these phenomena did nevertheless set in motion a process of change that was extremely important, thanks to certain educational measures for which it would be hard to find anything comparable in other countries. One of the most important of these innovations was the establishment of the “village institutes.”

The village institutes were founded in 1940 by a great pedagogue, I. H. Tonguç, in order to accelerate the cultural and material transformation of the Turkish villages. These institutes were innovative in that they were set up and run by peasant boys and girls who were supervised by a new type of monitor, teaching skills in the field that were adapted to regional needs. It was thus in the context of rural production that the elements of a general culture were passed down to students, who would continue the process in their own villages when they returned after completing their studies. The long-awaited agrarian reform announced by Atatürk was thus finally carried out by people who were specially trained to transform the traditional mental and material structures of the rural areas. This bold reform, which was conceived toward the end of Atatürk’s life (1938), was implemented two years after his death, during the presidency of İnönü, with the help of a courageous minister of education, Hasan Ali Yücel.

A wave of constructive enthusiasm greeted the reform. The twenty-one institutes had an average of fifteen thousand students. The Institute of Higher Education, designed to prepare highly qualified and specialized teachers, was created in 1942–43. The best students from the village institutes were eligible. There were theoretical and practical courses, but research was also undertaken and published. A group of young authors began collaborating in 1945 on a journal whose title translates simply as “Journal of the Village Institutes.” The teaching of foreign languages was also an important activity at the Institute of Higher Education. The courses offered took on an innovative and creative character. This institute, located near Ankara, rapidly became a center which attracted people from the villages as well as from the capital; it sponsored numerous shows, concerts, and lectures and made use of every opportunity to introduce to the public modern trends and modes of thinking.

One of the leading figures at the Institute of Higher
Education was Sabahettin Eyüboğlu, whose creative and infectious spirit, which opposed fanaticism in all its forms, made him one of the most influential personalities of his time. He also played a major role in the field of translation: being of Anatolian stock and having studied in France (Dijon), he was tapped by the Ministry of Education to set up a translation bureau, with the help of Nuriullah Ataç, the great literary critic of the post-Republican years. This bureau organized a systematic program to translate in a very short time hundreds of classical works from all languages, using the best Turkish translators and writers. This collective activity had a considerable impact on Turkish letters, for the numerous works translated opened new perspectives in the area of thought and literature. These publications, distributed nationwide, provided an opportunity not just to urban intellectuals, but also to rural teachers and institute students as well, to read both classical and modern works of world literature and to be exposed to the values and ideas expressed in these works. The cultural renaissance which resulted from this widening of intellectual horizons combined with that which had originated with the works of the intellectuals mentioned above.

Thus, paradoxically, the exploration of peasant life begun by the leftist intellectuals, who were to pay dearly for their quest for truth, was amplified by the pedagogical efforts initiated under Yücel’s ministry. This situation could only lead to violent conflicts, for social developments in Turkey after World War II brought to power the very social classes that were most averse to granting concessions to the underprivileged peasantry. The projects for agrarian reform proposed by the government were rejected in 1946 by the National Assembly, which was dominated by a majority of large landowners supported by their conservative allies. These groups sought a rapid accumulation of wealth, a desire that was in direct conflict with the projects for emancipating and modernizing the villages. Inonü was forced to retreat. Repressive measures led to the deterioration of the village institutes and of the spirit which they represented, putting an end to the pedagogical experiments initiated by Tonguç and Yücel, who were dismissed from public service and punished for their audacity.

Despite this radical break, the impetus resulting from the innovations of the 1940s continued for a long time to bear fruit in the field of literature; young graduates from the village institutes, ignoring the various kinds of persecution which must have been rained on them, began to speak out and took on the task of relating through literary fiction their own lives and their own conception of the world. The great variety of stories and novels which they wrote reflected the diversity of Anatolia itself, its spiritual richness and complexity. The most striking difference between these peasant writers and their predecessors was the radical change in perspective that they adopted toward their universe. Up to that point, they had been no more than passive objects of observation for urban writers; now they were becoming active subjects of this same literary movement. The peasant writer speaks not of the “other” but of himself, of an individual who was ignored, passed over, for centuries.

This mixing of cultures, this upheaval set off by the first writers to explore Anatolia in their fiction, by the vast movement of the village institutes, by exposure to world literature, and by the effort of modernization initiated by Atatürk, was bearing fruit. The peasant writers provided a vision of their reality that was brutal, forceful, and passionate. They assumed a stance that was denunciatory, accusatory even; but how could they have done otherwise, when they were giving voice to a suffering that had existed and gone unnoticed for centuries?

In what literary category could we classify this movement? Although it shares certain characteristics with the roman à thèse, the popular novel, and the historical novel, it does not really fit into any of these categories. It would be unfair, however, to assume that these novels, stories, and writings have no validity other than to reveal the Anatolian Atlantis, a lost continent rediscovered in the literary world! Even in a work that is not particularly literary, such as that of Mahmut Makal, the life experience which the narrative documents, the various seasons and the suffering they bring, the endearing humanity of the village people, their courage but also their passivity, their naiveté, their archaic ways, and what some call ignorance—all these things which make it seem as though contemporary history has had no impact are expressed in a prose that is beautifully simple, in perfect harmony with the nature of the narrative. Here in the prose of Makal and his friends is the spontaneous expression of Boland Barthes’s “zero degree of writing.” The following passage from Mahmut Makal’s work “Our Village” (discussed earlier) reveals the unadorned nature of his style and the vehemence of his message:

In his head, there was nothing except what he had assimilated in the course of his military service. His contact with the world had lasted only as long as he was a soldier. . . .

“How many years ago was it, uncle, that all that happened?”

“I was born in 1205 [the year of the Hegira], my late father set my date of birth somewhat later in order to put off my military service: I was called up at the same time as Kemsük Velî. We went to sign up at the same time. . . . We were enrolled on the twenty-second day of the sixth month at Konya. . . .”

But as to the year, however much he searched his mind, he could not remember. . . . So began the process of figuring out how old he must have been. . . .

“I was born around the time of Uncle’s wedding. Halî the Great, who is the oldest man in the village, but the date of his wedding is not known. . . . Nothing Uncle ever did was officially registered.”

“So let’s forget about Uncle’s wedding. At the time of the great famine, I wasn’t even in pants. . . . But no one knows when the great famine occurred.” . . .

“My mother changes my age constantly.”
"While I was over there, across the way, my labor began."
"Well, then, how old am I?"
"When the Negro killed Sinasi the khoja, you were in my belly, and I had two souls."
"Well, then?"
"I gave birth when Corporal Ishak died."
I turn to my father.
"When did Corporal Ishak die?"
"We had been flooded over by the water from the Black Slope and Ali the Cutter's children were drowned. . . .
Now then, it wasn't that year, but the following year."

The Anatolian village has changed somewhat since then. This is what Makal wrote fifteen years later, in the second French edition of Un village Anatolien (1978):

At the town hall they speak only of progress, and money, for which the peasants have become as greedy as they are for land, is eating away at relationships. Beits Timiş, Abdullah, Demir, Acol . . . busy themselves on the telephone [which did not exist fifteen years before]. They call the cooperative, the schools, the cafe in Turkish. They talk and talk and talk . . . and to make themselves seem important, they pretend to call Ankara, with the complicity of the telephone operator . . . One must not lose face in front of people who have worked abroad. So, Beits uses the intercom to talk to his colleagues in the next room.

The need to communicate, to speak, to hear each other, to hear another using modern technology, which made its appearances in the village at the same time as currency, introduces into a world still dominated by myth and archaic modes an explosive dimension which bears no relation to the concerns of Western literature. Other customs, another literature; the novelistic form has entered a world where capitalism is still in its infancy!

The main plot of the peasant novel is usually rather simplistic (though rooted in reality), drawing on social contrasts, conflicts between the rich peasant (the agha) and the poor peasants, all set against a backdrop of religious fanaticism or conservative prejudices. Women are particularly vulnerable and are victimized from all quarters; the process of awareness which these dramas set in motion is somewhat tortuous. A complex and peculiar network of relations is created between the characters and their inner selves. The narrative takes form around these particular structures and remains on the frontiers of the so-called bourgeois novel, from which it borrows many compositional techniques, combining them with resources from its own tradition. Indeed, the oral tradition of the professional folk storytellers from both the country and the city, as well as the half-oral, half-written tradition of the "Hikaye" (a seventeenth-century genre), represented an important legacy for later novelists. This is how writers like Fakir Baykurt, Talip Apaydin, Basaran, and many others came to create a particularly original literary current in Turkish literature, rooted in the origins of that literature.

Fakir Baykurt (b. 1929) wrote a trilogy around the figure of Irazca, an extravagant old Anatolian woman, capricious and quick-tempered, and incorporating the daily life of a village, the very fabric of its existence, its destiny. This impressive figure embodies the frustrations endured by men and women in the face of the indifference and injustice displayed by those successively vested with power throughout the ages.

The first book in the trilogy, Yılanların Öcü (The Vengeance of the Serpents; 1958), caused a great stir; deputies in the Democratic Party condemned both author and work, even though the case was thrown out of court. As Baykurt himself has pointed out, the novel "is written in a bitter language which troubles us all. In many chapters it is the people's subconscious that speaks." And it is indeed the collective memory that speaks.

"Don't go to Yemen, to Yemen," we have said over and over. Since the beginning of time, no one has paid heed to us. Women are all just like slaves, aren't we? "Don't go to Yemen!" There was the case of Kamilie, who went crazy repeating "Don't go to Yemen." There were those who left and came back alive, there were those who left and came back sick, who came back with white hair, and what of us? Our horses turned white as well. What terrible times, what ignorant sultans, so ruthless, those men! So many years of neglect toward the country, toward new brides, toward women. How can you expect a new bride to wait—a woman twenty years old, not even thirty—to wait for so many years. We have complained about our lot. And then suddenly it happened and it's past. A riddled past. The villages have decayed. We have come, through these days of grief and mourning, widows. My hunter is dead, left early, we stayed behind, widow. Chali the Black was a hunter, idle. Holding a saz [reed] in his hand, he sat alone in a corner, swish, swish, swish. I will never forget, never; his friends would come over in a group, widow. He died and left too . . . Grasshopper . . .
Taxes for me to bear alone, widow. In the morning I went to gather wood, in the afternoon to plough, widow. What endless nights without faith, without him. They pounded on my door. Bayram was little, widow. I couldn't open for anyone, widow."

An obsessive theme runs through "The Vengeance of the Serpents" from beginning to end, that of the reptiles' hatred for Irazca's family, the Karabayrams, who were responsible for the death of Shahmeram, king of the serpents. Irazca is also engaged in a tragicomic struggle with a powerful neighbor and his ally, the village mayor, for a reason which, though seemingly futile, is of prime importance to the old woman; she hates injustice. The "people's subconscious" mentioned by Baykurt is the communal sensibility of the Anatolian village, the product of a slow historical evolution within a closed world. The individual emerges only with great difficulty from a world that is both real (inequality, climate, injustice) and imaginary (myths, superstitions).

Peasant literature was to take on a new dimension with the first writings of Yashar Kémal. Originally from
the village of Adana, he began his career by publishing the remarkable story Sari sıcak (Yellow Heat) in 1952. The publication of Memed, My Hawk in 1955 brought fame, and he has since turned out many more novels at a rapid pace, all written in an epic style combining real and fantastic elements.

Kemal’s novels are generally set in the Chukur-Ova plain or the foothills of the Taurus Mountains and treat a rather broad set of problems: the changes resulting when an archaic rural society is confronted with modern capitalist brutality, new landowners, the destruction of nature, the clash of East and West, of old and new myths, and of ideologies, the transformation of an entire world. Memed the Thin, a rebel and provocateur turned honorable bandit, revolts in the same way as Sabahattin Ali’s hero Yusuf the Taciturn, but Kemal manages to transcend the anecdotal character of the adventure novel through his poetic style, the exemplary humanity of his characters, and his vivid epic imagery.

With Ortadirek (1960; Eng. The Wind from the Plain) Kemal succeeded, like Baykurt before him, in creating a memorable character in the person of an old Anatolian woman named Meryemce. In order to survive another winter in their mountainside settlement, Meryemce and her family must, at all costs, go down to the plain, where day laborers earn meager wages during the cotton-picking season. This transhumance, led by an ailing, tenacious, half-delirious old woman, takes on an allegorical dimension. For the journey, Meryemce saddles up an aged horse, which dies soon after they set out. She is then carried the rest of the long way down on her son’s shoulders. The extraordinary dramatic tension of the mother-son relationship, the burden of misfortune, the process of decomposition which grief works on a human being, the will to survive at any cost—all give Meryemce the symbolic stature of a woman from the Third World struggling against adversity.

By using a language enriched with the inexhaustible store of images inspired by southern Anatolia, and by his technique of thematic counterpoint, Kemal manages to draw the reader into a spellbinding world, an unknown universe gradually revealed. His style has the charm of the great Anatolian storytellers, but it also shares the flaws inherent in the oral tradition: incantatory repetition and overlong dialogues and monologues, which make sense when designed for evening recitation to peasant audiences but which weigh down a written text and throw it off balance. Nevertheless, the reader is swept along by the lyrical qualities of the language and the magical descriptions of the landscapes and characters, so that the poetic majesty of the work as a whole causes one to overlook defects that might otherwise seem unforgivable. Kemal had originally wanted to be a poet, and he remained one in his fiction.

Then with all its branches and its trunk, the walnut tree reached toward the sky and stretched out toward the mountains. The whole earth lit up as if it were day. The darkness of the mountains had vanished, and the darkness of the night. Have you ever seen a tree of light as big as the whole earth unfold against the blackness of night? Ah! my God, God whose wisdom I adore! An enormous tree of light reaching to the sun, the stars! And the night was so terribly black. I swear to you there wasn’t a single star. And the tree grew and grew! A tree streaming toward the sky with its branches and its foliage, a tree of light! . . . The tree remained luminous until dawn. I stayed to contemplate it until the break of day. My eyes were dazzled by it and I was exhausted. The horse I was riding, that blessed beast picked up its ears and watched too. When dawn broke behind the mountain, the walnut tree became small again, very small, it was divested of its light and returned to earth. When day broke, I again saw the green walnut tree with its foliage standing in front of me, as if nothing had happened.

The agglomerated villages and provincial towns spawned still other works focusing on Anatolia written by urban novelists who had a thorough understanding of the region: Samim Kocagöz, Necati Cumalı, Kemal Bilgic, Sayar, and Bekir Yıldız. These writers enriched the Turkish novel considerably, adding a great variety of situations and characters. But what is truly remarkable is the progress made by writers from the villages, who in the space of a single generation reached the point where they were producing novels. No matter that the route had been sketched out by their predecessors or by their urban contemporaries.

Turkish society, which was predominantly rural up to the 1950s, was to undergo an abrupt change thereafter. The fifty thousand tractors and farm machines allocated to Turkey under the Marshall Plan could only benefit farmers of means—i.e., those who owned a large amount of arable land, possessed bank credit, and enjoyed the support of the Democratic Party, which came to power in 1950. Sharecroppers and poor peasants were forced to leave the villages, and approximately half of them went to lie in slums on the out-

![Image](https://example.com/yashar-kemal-the-sea-crossed-fisherman.jpg)
skirts of cities like Istanbul, Ankara, and Izmit. This caused a wide-scale social upheaval, for the breakdown of the archaic system of production served both to reinforce social inequalities and to put an end to the closed economy of the forty thousand Anatolian villages.

As the once predominantly rural population decreased dramatically, the urban centers grew proportionally, but the cities were incapable of assimilating such a great influx. Industrial growth had not kept pace with the increasing numbers of potential workers. Statistics showed that the agricultural sector was in need of a minority, but it was being replaced by metropolitan centers that were half villages, resulting in a new type of agglomeration: slum cities. Uprooted peasants were transplanted to the inner city, where they formed a social class halfway between the proletariat and the peasantry, in search of a thousand and one little trades and odd jobs that would allow them to survive. Another factor that contributed to the crisis was the growth of Turkey's population from seventeen million to nearly fifty million in the space of sixty years. The exodus toward industrialized Western nations whose economies were expanding during the 1960s led to the integration of a sizable peasant population into the industrial sector of countries like West Germany, France, Switzerland, Belgium, and Holland. This complex social change had repercussions in many areas, including literature. The oft-portrayed and somewhat Manichean (though real) struggle between the agha and the poor peasant was gradually replaced by more complex novelistic structures, which took into account subtler aspects of human relations and raised many questions about the individual and society.

In the development of the Anatolian novel, two specific and very different cases deserve mention. First, the novel by Ferid Edgü, O (Hini), subtitled "A Season at Hakkari," which deals with a theme that had been treated by Karaosmanoğlu a half-century earlier and by Makal thirty years earlier. Edgü's portrayal of inner motives and his style of writing shed a different light on the problem, however. Although the work concerns the isolation of a snowbound village decimated by an epidemic and abandoned by an indifferent administration, the focus is no longer on the historical guilt of the intellectual (as in "The Outsider") or on the despair over the uneven fight against an archaic system (as in "Our Village"), but rather on the almost metaphysical absurdity of the absence of interaction between two fundamentally different worlds. Although Edgü sets forth the concrete reasons which explain why such a dialogue is impossible, it is an existential sort of anguish that he feels in the face of life, death, and the impossibility of resolving the absurdity of the present. Cut off from the others, he feels dispossessed of himself, of his own self-image.

I had conserved the memory of no human face. My fright continued, for I had no memory of my own face.

My face (at least mine, a stunned reader). Nowhere to be found. I went out.
I asked the innkeeper for a mirror.
A mirror? he said, staring at me in disbelief. What do you want with a mirror?
Nothing.
I went back to my room. I felt my face with my hands.
Like a blind man who sees with his fingers.

Both Karaosmanoğlu and Makal, each in his own way, are disturbed by the notion of time or space; Edgü even feels dispossessed of his physical presence. He is original in that he breaks with the system of imagery and writing that characterizes the peasant authors: using a series of short poetic annotations, he seeks to explore the experience of living via a painful interior monologue aimed at discovering another way of seeing the world.

Among the numerous novelistic subgenres that exist in Turkish literature—the realistic, intimist, and historical novels—it was again in the context of the Anatolian theme that a young woman, Latife Tekin, also of peasant stock, was to contribute something quite new, writing two novels, one after the other, with striking titles, Sevgili Arısz Ölüm (Dear Shapeless Death; 1983) and Berci Kristin Çöp Masalları (Bere Kristine's Tales of Filth; 1984), which created a sensation among readers and critics and went through four printings in six months. Regarding her strange childhood, she wrote: "I learned to read frolicking under wooden beds with little demons and fairies." Tekin was to become acquainted with the underworld as well as the real world when her family moved to the city: "In order to get my footing in the city, I had to fight constantly. I had bruises and cuts everywhere."

Transplanted to the city (but what a city!), the villages are re-created amid piles of garbage, the refuse of the big city, sprawling shantytowns thrown together out of odds and ends overnight by a desperate population. The new city dwellers bring with them their imaginary world, their poetry, their vocabulary. The author, like her characters, transfigures reality to make it bearable. In the villages as in the shantytowns, the frenzy born of the mingling of imaginary and real worlds creates a style, a narrative in the form of an obsessive interior monologue which transgresses the rules of "good composition." The result is startling. The critic and writer Murat Belge states, "Twenty years of social transformation have finally given us an original cultural harvest." The critic Fethi Naci wrote, "Dream and reality overlap. A fine sense of humor, a story that proceeds at a breathless pace." And the novelist and essayist Atilla Ilhan was also enraptured. "You have given us a breath of fresh air by describing peasants grappling from day to day with genies and fairies, with their illusions and problems."

Tekin ranks with other writers of great talent like Leyle Erbil, Sevim Burak, and Nazlı Eray, who have sought to depict the frenzy of the imaginary, the obsessions of the subconscious. In her second book particularly, she creates a kind of collective character, that of
men and woman struggling to get their footing in the huge swamp of filth that surrounds the big city. It is a task comparable to that of Sisyphus, a struggle against bulldozers, trucks, and their masters, who seek to demolish shacks built overnight. The high and low points of this incredible struggle, this adventure, this saga, are related in a work that hovers on the frontier between novel and poetry: it is a picaresque lyric, a new kind of epic.

With each demolition and rebuilding, the shantytowns diminished a bit in size. Eventually they lost all semblance of a dwelling, and the people had lost all semblance of humanity. They had blended with the dust, mud, and garbage. Their clothing was full of holes; they were in rags from head to foot. Three babies, overwrought by the demolition and by the cold, died. They turned into birds and flew off into the sky before the eyes of the wreckers. A woman who had injured a wrecker with an ax was escorted down the hill by two gendarmes. Those who remained behind could barely breathe after salvaging the sheet metal and sorting through the garbage. The last days of the demolition, not a single tree remained on the hill. Anything that people could get their hands on—rusty tin cans, light fixtures, disposable plates, boxes pulled out of the garbage, nylons, bottles—all were used to build the shantytowns. "The hill plunged into deep darkness. The wind attacked the roofs of the shantytowns after midnight. It tore off the roofs and bore them aloft like wings. With the babies attached to the roofs, it flew away." "

If we are to reach a conclusion regarding the peasant novel or the novel focusing on Anatolia, we might say that it has a bright future. Moreover, this quest for identity is being pursued in other fields besides literature. A number of prize-winning films, for example, have been directly inspired by the literature of the peasant novel, as the following list attests: The Ard Summer by Metin Erksan, winner of the Grand Prize at the Berlin Festival in 1963; Hope by Yılmaz Güney, special jury prize in 1970 at Grenoble; Yol by the same author and S. Ogoren, winner of the Cannes Festival in 1982; A Season in Hakkarı by F. Kral, with a script written by Ferid Edgü, winner of the Berlin Festival in 1983; The Herd, winner of the Locarno Festival in 1979, Hazal (1980) by Özgentürk, and The Horse by the same author, winner of the Tokyo Festival in 1985. This vast movement has influenced many other forms of art in Turkey as well, including painting, sculpture, music, and theatre, but a discussion of the impact of the peasant novel in these areas is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article.

Paris

Translated from the French
By Joan Grimbirt

The Woman in the Darkroom: Contemporary Women Writers in Turkey

By GÜNEŞ GÜN

Turkey must be one of the few countries in the world where women writers have been leading the avant-garde for the past two decades. How come? One can only speculate. First of all, women have things to say that have never been said before, and to do it, they must bravely transform old repressions into powerhouses of language. Second, since the serious fiction of the sixties, and before, belonged to men, women writers have nothing to lose in experimenting with postmodernist forms. Third and most important of all, since Turkey is a country which has lost historical power and has been put in its place in the Third World. Turks can identify with the explosion of consciousness that liberates the underdog; and women, without doubt, have traditionally been the underdogs of this nation. As we all know now, the only liberty worth having is the liberty that is taken. Turkey's new women writers do take liberties. They are therefore the current heroes of the culture.

Still, the liberating moment is ephemeral, not only in Turkey but everywhere. Where do you go after you climb out of old constraints? You create or, more likely, you borrow new constraints, new conventions of