

# *Democratizing the Modern in Contemporary Turkish Poetry: Elif Sofya's and Asuman Susam's Ecopoetics*

Deniz Gundogan Ibrism

Washington University in St. Louis

**ABSTRACT:** Modern Turkish poetry has been occupied with an aesthetic need to fashion a style for the “modern,” understanding it as a universal condition of being determined by notions of the “secular,” the “national,” and the “local.” Since the Garip and İkinci Yeni movements beginning in the early 1940s, Turkish poetry has also favored a straight and linear understanding of modernist aesthetics as having a stable past and future and a place. I argue that contemporary women poets, including Elif Sofya and Asuman Susam, by exposing entanglement rather than straight and clear development, expand as well as challenge the modernist event in Turkey. Their revisions of modernist aesthetics and composition of affective histories have explored the porous and mobile dimensions of queer time and space. These poets have both complemented and complicated the temporal and spatial axis of traditionally established modernist inquiry, gesturing toward what I call “peripheral cosmological aesthetics.”

**S**INCE THE 1940s, modernist Turkish poetry has developed through two major but dissimilar movements: the Garip (literally “Strange”; later, First New) and İkinci Yeni (Second New) movements. İkinci Yeni poets, including Turgut Uyar, Cemal Süreya, Edip Cansever, İlhan Berk, among others, provocatively built upon and refracted the legacy of the Garip movement by establishing formalism, deformation in language and grammar, free

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association, abstraction, opacity, cynicism, and alienation in everyday affiliations in their poetry as its fundamental characteristics. İkinci Yeni's distinctive emphasis on imagism and free verse allowed the movement to become self-conscious and ideological rather than a straightforward historical development and therefore was welcomed as "the modernist event" in Turkish poetry. In particular, the form of free verse and cryptic and encoded elusiveness became the register for this Turkish modernist event. *What was said* depended directly on *how it was said*, and the idiom was often dense and obscure, seemingly consolidating apolitical, gender-neutral modernist aesthetics. The modernist Turkish event, by and large, assumed the straight and linear understanding of modernist aesthetics as having a stable past and future and a place.

However, beginning in the late 1990s, with the drastic changes in the aftermath of the Cold War, discussions on the "end of the nation-state" and the beginning of a "borderless age" became popular in public intellectual life in Turkey. With the end of the Cold War, struggles with the redefinition of one's own identity and place with regard to globalization, which on the political level can be understood as the crisis of the nation-state, have become prominent. In particular, the transition from nation-state governments to an international and neoliberal governance has had a radical impact on the understanding of modernity and modern aesthetics.<sup>1</sup> Intellectuals, writers, and poets in contemporary Turkey have felt the consequences of these new formations as well, spearheading deviant efforts to expand the past period's desire to thwart normative aesthetics, knowledge, geographies, and temporalities. Especially since the 2000s, contemporary poets of Turkey have paved the way for understanding different subjectivities and positionalities, rather than yielding to a single national identity, and citizenship within advanced capitalism, in which the capitalist model has been integrated and developed deeply and extensively and for a prolonged period, resulting in uneven power centers and power structures.<sup>2</sup> In this context, one can argue that there has been a profound effort to transform paradigmatically the conditions under which poetry has been produced and received in contemporary Turkey in relation to the emergence of postmodern culture as a result of the economic, technological, and structural transformations brought about by neoliberalism. Expansion and challenge of the modernist event in Turkey, I suggest, have become remarkably visible since the 2000s. This endeavor has opened up a novel space for understanding modernist aesthetics not as a monolithic entity but as a much wider, more diverse phenomenon in Turkey. The scene of contemporary Turkish poetry captures both global and cultural embodied practices that are articulated and mediated within the dimension of nonnormative aspects of subjectivities and materialities experienced and recognized as partial, contextual, fluid, performative, and precarious rather than the straight and linear understanding of modernist aesthetics with a stable past and future and a place.

More importantly, there has been a process of what I call "pluralizing modernism" which makes possible an effective method to connect the formations of the new and the readings of the past beyond seemingly apolitical, gender-neutral debates about modernism's and in particular İkinci Yeni's experimental forms. Together with an entangled analysis of violence and destroyed subjectivities and materialities, contemporary poets mobilize what queer ecologist and writer Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands calls the "blue" affect, which is an embodiment of negativity

<sup>1</sup> Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), 1–10.

<sup>2</sup> Benita Parry, "Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms," *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 40, no. 1 (2009): 27–55.

whose efficacy is evident in the production of nonnormative materialities in an open-ended and amorphous present that perfectly undoes the boundary between self and world, mind and body, mind and matter, hence yielding a new form knowledge production based in shared experiences of human and nonhuman precarity.<sup>3</sup> This blue affect remarkably and provocatively creeps into modernist aesthetics precisely because it locates care beyond the strictures of progress, linear time, and heteronormative reproductive futurity.<sup>4</sup> While past, present, and future are often yoked together through progressive events such as birth, adolescence, child-rearing, and death, the blue affect complicates this linear history, ontology, and politics. The contemporary Turkish poetry scene can be thought of as a vanguard for making visible these complex and often-violent lines we draw between progress and forms of life—the constructed borders that constantly produce and expose “the other.” In particular, a contemporary cohort of innovative women poets including Elif Sofya, Asuman Susam, Anita Sezgener, Nilay Özer, Gonca Özmen, among others, imagine nonnormative and novel possibilities for attachment, kinship, and care beyond the market economy that voraciously feeds off its own flesh. By reconsidering modernist totality, these poets make us aware of our proximity to an animate, sensuous, more-than-human environment both spatially and temporally. Their poetics urges us to expand and redefine the humanist attitude that has been so prevalent in the Turkish modernist event. In other words, these poets defy the totalizing modernist aesthetic project that conceptualizes the human as some kind of Universal Man, a bounded individual, safely zipped up in a rational and linear costume of his own, and hence the measure of all things. I suggest that this gesture creates a vital space for democratizing the term “modern” in contemporary Turkish poetry.

Elif Sofya’s poetics poignantly speaks to the fractures within modern capitalist society and critiques the mastery over both the human and the nonhuman world. Her poetics addresses non-normative assumptions about gender and sexuality and challenges nationality, territory, ethnocentrism, as well as the normative family unit. Her sense of alternative kinship and identification with nonhuman beings and the earth as a whole is woven throughout her poetry.<sup>5</sup> Her remarkable poem “The Siege of Birds”<sup>6</sup> foregrounds the insistence on marginalizing nonhuman history through a modern, nationalized, and militarized human voice:

The homeland of birds is moving away from the seas  
 voices wobble, insofar as they know  
 no chills in their bodies  
 they are waiting with a few drops of rain up above  
 Laying siege to military barracks,  
 weeding out land mines and borders from the soil . . .  
 No doubt, they are taking their decisive steps  
 With their mouths, they are leaving their screams

<sup>3</sup> Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 331.

<sup>4</sup> See Edelman on queer futurity: Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 3–10.

<sup>5</sup> On Elif Sofya, see Meliz Ergin and Özen Nergis Dolcerocca, “Edebiyata ekoeleştirel yaklaşımlar: Ekoşiir ve Elif Sofya” [Ecocritical approaches to literature: Ecopoetry and Elif Sofya], *Selçuk University Journal of Faculty of Letters*, vol. 0, no. 36 (2016): 297–314.

<sup>6</sup> The original title of the poem is “Kuşların kuşatması.” All translations from the Turkish are my own unless otherwise noted.

that beggar rigid descriptions to outside  
 Razing everything to the ground just like that  
 and not holding this over the world  
 as they depart burying the wind underneath their wings  
 they know  
 in the chant of history  
 No one but the human and  
 the siege of the birds will fall on deaf ears.<sup>7</sup>

In this poem we see a longing for another language beyond anthropogenic forces of violence which endanger both human and nonhuman lives. We find it difficult to understand and navigate the loss of the language of birds and, more importantly, the loss of the history of the non-human other in the material and affective terrain of masculine militarized modernity. In this sense, Sofya's poem challenges the conventions of the modern nation-state and expands the contours of what is included and excluded in that militarized society. To be sure, birds as nonhuman living beings are not included in history. However, Sofya's birds, with their decisive steps and screams, urge the reader to rethink the course of modern history, the world, and subjectivity, reorienting previously segregated categories such as nature/culture, human/nonhuman, animate/inanimate, and mind/matter. In this context, the poem questions the anthropocentric leanings of modernist humanism and the development of urbanism as well as civilization's function of isolating humanity from the rest of the world. These lines also go beyond the anthropomorphizing analogies and associated loss, grief, and mourning of the more-than-human world and nonhuman losses. I suggest that this offers a radical acceptance of and an honest look into a devastated landscape full of land mines, so-called national borders, and inevitably dead bodies. Sofya thereby offers an eco-ethical look into the often-violated boundary between the natural and the sociopolitical. As seen here, her poems are permeated by birds and their screams, traversing minefields and contesting the boundaries of modern and technologically mediated bodies. The birds reimagine the exclusively human modern history which is tethered to a neoliberally individualistic subject.

Elif Sofya's sense of kinship and identification with nonhuman beings and biotic elements is woven throughout her poetry. Her poem "Alzheimer"<sup>8</sup> redefines memory and remembrance through the inherently unequal structure of the anthropocentric assumption that nonhuman animals and nonhuman matter exist only primarily in relation to humans:

The grief which had choked water  
 grew longer and longer  
*Voices that touched my hair*  
 grew longer and longer  
 I nested in animality  
 Rooting myself in an ant *brain's* folds and curves  
 I tried to live.  
 We do not survive

<sup>7</sup> Elif Sofya, *Dik âlâ* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2014), 14–15.

<sup>8</sup> The original title of the poem is "Alzheimer."

just to lie down to die in the heart of the death  
 memory is called a graveyard  
 and it only gets bigger in our heads  
 Happily, it is dementia, thankfully it is Alzheimer.<sup>9</sup>

These lines emphasize that life and civilization are properties not of individual entities but rather of the earth as a whole. In “Alzheimer” the human memory is taken back to its archaic context, to the earth, to the soil, and to the graveyard. We see how Sofya advances the temporal and spatial complexities of life as a becoming, as a dynamic process of an individual’s vital and embodied engagement with the environment and language. The subject here opens the self to animality, and hence to a different and new understanding of the modern and rational individual. The subject embraces innovative forms of intimacy that betoken not only novel modes of becoming but also nonnormative ways of affiliation with others and alternative modes of knowledge production and its transmission. This encourages us to remember Walter Benjamin’s argument on different concepts of historical time and tradition. As Benjamin claims, history is based, not on a progressive flow of “homogeneous, empty time,” but on disruptive constellations of the present and the past.<sup>10</sup> Here, Sofya’s poem challenges *linear* historical time and a *linear* conception of history. Moreover, I suggest that it offers a queer moment of facing death in the diagnosis of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease, rendering lives out of sync with the model of modernity, linearity, and progress. One can also link this condition to Mortimer-Sandilands’s conceptualization of blue affect, which allows for a meaningful pause or hesitation to reflect on the possibility of one’s becoming something other than the designated. The language and temporality of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease might allow the reader to rethink time and space, history and politics, and gender and its concomitant identity-regulating categories. Sofya understands and writes within a larger constellation of other local life-forms and nonhuman subjects, each with its own wounds, temporalities, and perceptual modalities. This view sustains the idea that the human subject is always intertwined with its environment, paving the way for ethical and political responsibility in coming to terms with past injustices and harms pertaining to both human and nonhuman life-forms.

In a similar vein, Asuman Susam’s ecopoetics rethinks the relationship to nature neither within a romantic or primordial intimacy nor from a masculine utilitarian perspective; rather, her imagery brings to light the capacity for thinking in a specifically ecomaterial way only in community with nonhumans and the earth. Susam underscores entanglements that coconstitute the human and nonhuman world in their experiences of loss, trauma, and grief. This emerges as a vitalist poetics that is based on open-ended understanding and that moves beyond the singularity of modern human subjectivity. In particular, landscape surfaces become a lively and porous site, encompassing many other nonhuman forms of being while reorienting human traumatic experiences and rewriting both the self and memory anew. Her poem “The Song”<sup>11</sup> is a telling example of this reorientation:

Deer . . . withered branch-like antlers  
 In eternity of snow

<sup>9</sup> Elif Sofya, *hayhuy* (Istanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2019), 72–73.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969).

<sup>11</sup> The original title of the poem is “Şarkı.”

within an endless gaze, as if they had been there all along  
 Stay with them, in antiquity  
 .....  
 At the sand dune fields of memory  
 Let not your heart be troubled by the howling wolves  
 neither let it be afraid of bones and teeth marks  
 and yet be afraid of words  
 and the Janus-faced breath of the mind  
 Have no fear about the arctic grief  
 in this vastness, at the end of the World  
 You remember, you are the primordial loneliness.  
 Abide in water, submit yourself to whirlpools, to the ground.  
 Be a rootless water lily, be a water snake  
 Sense your horses, stomping their feet in your belly.<sup>12</sup>

The poet persona here moves into a realm of the nonsignificant, a thing neither fully human nor fully nonhuman and animal, a kind of ghost which expands the normative body into a porous entity. We might see here Susam's critique of the privileging of the modern human (specifically, the human male) that instills a set of mental, discursive, and spiritual values that glorifies perfect rationality and reason. The poem can also be read as a critique of the ecological, ethical, economic, and existential crises of the present in the hands of capitalist penetration. With this in mind, these lines encourage us to rethink the concepts of the bounded human body, the human memory, and home from a nonteleological perspective, upsetting the binaries of subject/object, nature/culture, and mind/body regarding modern, Enlightenment rational and scientific discourse. Thereby, "The Song" presents a strong critique of modernity and its "monological" imaginary, which from the Enlightenment onward has supported the supposedly universally valid categories of thought and reason. The very core of human existence for Susam lies in the earth and sand. Likewise, another of her poems provides us with similar archaic feelings that question the nature of the increasingly globalized economy:

To remember is to disappear without a space  
 indefinite, dark, patchy  
 This soul, this subject, what does it retain of ME?  
 The hand forgets its own whiteness, erasing its own self  
 Things that wind makes sand to murmur creep into dreams  
 The World is a wanderlust  
 but the human  
 who is more scary than him!<sup>13</sup>

The emphasis on the imagery of the self-erasing hand here indicates that there are no fixed and established points of departure: the subject and the object are always interchangeable, reciprocally constituting one another. Moreover, indefinite, dark, and patchy contours of the subject and the murmur of the nonhuman world suspend the unequalled force of humans on the planet.

<sup>12</sup> Asuman Susam, *Kemik inadı* [Bone stubbornness] (Istanbul: Can Yayınları, 2015), 19–20.

<sup>13</sup> Asuman Susam, *Pleasantta* [Placenta] (Istanbul: Everest Yayınları, 2008).

Ambiguity here shatters the ordinary lineage and heritage and gestures toward queer temporalities that move beyond the anthropocentric fantasy of familial intimacies, identification, and history. Within an oppressively heterosexist future—in which reproductive individuals and family structures are the major points of reference—the poem opens up an ecological space for another way of dwelling and kinship in the world through its blue affect: indefinite, dark, and patchy. Susam’s ecological thinking makes us question the humanist and modern subjectivity as well as to a certain extent the commodification of life itself.

In the face of such an apparent eco-ethical imagery, it is suggestive to conclude that the scene of contemporary Turkish poetry offers new lines of inquiry about the self and environment as well as the language of the senses. Susan Stewart argues that lyric poetry enables “a repository of synaesthesia, an archive of how the form has served as a means for working through the body’s ongoing mutuality of relations between nature and exterior objects and the ego’s necessary articulation of itself as both separate from the world and transformed by the world.”<sup>14</sup> Seen from this perspective, Sofya’s and Susam’s ecopoetics reorients us and expands our repertoire of modernist aesthetics to incorporate blue affects and blue poetics, such as the generous repertoire of grief, uneasiness, and discomfort derived from illness, darkness, and ambiguity. Their ecopoetics offers new and queer ways of thinking about the self, time, and space that make strange our understanding of pasts, presents, and futures. As Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman remind us, “negativity unleashes the energy that allows for the possibility of change.”<sup>15</sup> For Sofya and Susam, the self’s encounter with negativity and nonsovereignty through nonhuman affiliations can reconfigure Enlightenment humanism and modernist totality, allowing us to recognize our own porosity in the world. Seen in this way, contemporary Turkish poetry thus challenges enduring national and political teleology and presents a transformative feature of its era. I would consider this transformation an expansion or, rather, an invitation to queer ecopoetics, underscoring complicated, uncomfortable relationships to environment and home. Moreover, I would like to call this challenge “peripheral cosmological aesthetics,” which is attentive to the particular forms of nonnormative homemaking and kinship practices of peripheral societies and the poetics these engender for establishing a connection between nature and human experiences and thus between the cosmos and the human world. “Cosmological,” as seen in Sofya’s and Susam’s poems, implicates not only humans but entire systems of transformative relations amid the cosmos. I conclude that this transformative impulse results from the imaginative proximity to the past and future of globalization as well as to heightened *ecological awareness and protest against the globalization and advanced capitalism of the current age*. A

<sup>14</sup> Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 42.

<sup>15</sup> Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), viii.