

Ecocriticism in Turkey

Meliz Ergin
Koç University, Turkey
mergin@ku.edu.tr

DOI: [HTTPS://DOI.ORG/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.2.3489](https://doi.org/10.37536/ECOZONA.2020.11.2.3489)



Abstract

Ecocriticism gained visibility in Turkish academia in the early 2000s. This essay offers a brief analysis of the state of ecocriticism as an emerging field in Turkey and sheds light on the growing interest in ecology in both academic and non-academic circles. First it overviews the academic conventions and publications that provided the initial momentum for the birth of Turkish ecocriticism. Then it examines the current trends in Turkish ecocriticism by surveying both literary and critical publications that propose new readings of pressing environmental issues. After underlining possible future directions for ecocritical research, it calls attention to the expanding interest in ecology in different disciplines such as film and media. In closing, the essay highlights the university-based platforms that bring together scholars and practitioners to foster interdisciplinary environmental research.

Keywords: Turkish ecocriticism, Turkish literature, ecocritical theory, film and media, interdisciplinarity.

Resumen

La ecocrítica empezó a hacerse visible en el mundo académico turco a principios de los 2000. Este ensayo ofrece un breve análisis de la ecocrítica como campo emergente en Turquía y arroja luz sobre el creciente interés en la ecología, tanto en los círculos académicos como en los no académicos. Primero, el ensayo proporciona una visión general de las convenciones académicas y de las publicaciones que proporcionaron el impulso inicial para el nacimiento de la ecocrítica turca. Después, se examinan las tendencias actuales en la ecocrítica turca, explorando las publicaciones literarias y críticas que proponen nuevas lecturas de los problemas medioambientales urgentes. Después de subrayar la posible futura trayectoria de la investigación ecocrítica, llama la atención sobre el creciente interés de la ecología en diferentes disciplinas como el cine y los medios de comunicación. Para concluir, el ensayo destaca las plataformas universitarias que reúnen a académicos y profesionales para fomentar la investigación medioambiental interdisciplinaria.

Palabras clave: Ecocrítica turca, literatura turca, teoría ecocrítica, cine y medios de comunicación, interdisciplinaria.

Ecocriticism gained visibility in Turkish academia in the early 2000s. The initial momentum necessary for the birth of Turkish ecocriticism was provided by two important conferences: the IV. International Conference of Literatures in English, which focused on “The Endangered Planet in Literature” and took place in Doğuş University (İstanbul, 2005), and the “The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons” conference organized by Hacettepe and Ankara Universities (Antalya, 2009). The 2009 convention culminated in the first book-length publication of Turkish ecocriticism. Co-edited by Serpil Oppermann, Ufuk Özdağ, Nevin Özkan and Scott Slovic, *The Future of Ecocriticism:*

New Horizons (Cambridge, 2011) includes articles on both Turkish and non-Turkish authors and a roundtable discussion among the four editors about the state of ecocriticism as an emerging field in Turkey.

In the following years, two more important books came out with the dual intention of introducing Turkish readers to ecocriticism and of offering analyses of exemplary works from Turkish and world literature. Whereas *Ekoeleştiri: Çevre ve Edebiyat* (2012; Ecocriticism: Environment and Literature), edited by Serpil Oppermann, comprises essays whose topics range from the poetry of Orhan Veli (1914-1950) to the Epic of Gilgamesh, Ufuk Özdağ's *Çevreci Eleştiriye Giriş: Doğa, Kültür, Edebiyat* (2014; Introduction to Environmental Criticism: Nature, Culture, Literature) focuses on first- and second-wave ecocriticism and examines the works of the Turkish botanist and nature writer Hikmet Birand and novelist Yaşar Kemal. Shedding light on a lesser known cultural perspective, these books played a significant role in expanding the boundaries of ecocritical scholarship beyond North American and Central European contexts. They placed Turkish literary criticism within the larger debate on environmental cultures and world literatures.

As manifest in subsequent scholarly articles, the first academic investigations of Turkish ecocriticism predominantly focused on early twentieth-century authors deeply concerned with the natural environment, such as Cevat Şakir Kabaağaçlı (a.k.a. the Fisherman of Halicarnassus, 1886–1973), Sait Faik Abasıyanık (1906–1954), and Yaşar Kemal (1923-2015). Kabaağaçlı wrote extensively about the marine life of the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas; Abasıyanık portrayed the life on the islands in the Marmara Sea, particularly the lives of fishermen; and Kemal depicted the Anatolian land, its biocultural diversity, and the usurpation of natural sources in rigorous detail. Another point of interest for ecocritics was *köy edebiyatı* (village literature), a literary tradition that has its roots in village institutions established in the 1940s as part of the educational reforms in the newly founded Turkish Republic. The goal of the institutions was to recruit young people from villages and to train them in their own milieu so that they would become village teachers and experts in various areas. While the institutes were closed down in the early 1950s, they paved the way for several important writers such as Fakir Baykurt (1929–1999), who shed light on pressing ecological and political issues in Turkey's less visible rural areas.

These early twentieth-century writers were an obvious choice for Turkish ecocritics in the initial stages as they paid close attention to the natural environment. Contemporary author Latife Tekin remarks that in contrast to Yaşar Kemal's generation, her generation of writers forgot about nature while engaging in the political struggles (Tekin 2014) of the 1970s and 1980s. She also notes that her ecological novels are better received by the younger generation than her own peers (Tekin 2011). Tekin makes a significant observation about literary history as she compares different generations with regard to their priorities and (dis)interest in environmental issues. However, there are exceptions to this observation. To give a few examples, Latife Tekin herself has published several novels that focus on ecofeminism, urban ecology, toxic environments, and environmental injustice. She combines a political reading of ecological problems with an

ecological reading of social issues, and moves away from the socialist realism of both the political novel and village literature toward poetic and metaphorical narratives. In a different vein, Buket Uzuner writes symbolically and historically rich novels that revisit pre-Islamic Shamanistic traditions to show their relevance to the environmental issues of modern-day society.

Contemporary ecocritics are turning to writers like Tekin and Uzuner, among others, to examine previously unexplored subject matters. The current scholarship on Turkish ecocriticism is further enriched by readings of canonical texts in a different light. To give an example, Bilge Karasu (1930-1995) produced a thematically and stylistically diverse body of work ranging from postmodern novels to fable-like tales that question the human-animal divide. His writing has, in the past, been appreciated for its linguistic innovation, postmodern experimentation, and philosophical undertones, but it has only recently come to ecocritics' attention. Filled with vulnerable bodies traversing species boundaries, Karasu's work has become a valuable resource for animal studies scholars.

Over the past three years, there has been a steady increase in the number of books offering ecocritically informed analyses of contemporary Turkish literature and culture. *The Eco-poetics of Entanglement in Contemporary Turkish and American Literatures* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), authored by Meliz Ergin, foregrounds entanglement as a guiding concept in Derrida's work and considers its implications for ecocritical thought. After bringing deconstruction into a dialogue with social ecology and new materialism to outline entanglements in three strands of thought, it investigates natural-social entanglements in the works of Latife Tekin and the U.S.-based poet Juliana Spahr. *Animals, Plants, and Landscapes: An Ecology of Turkish Literature and Film* (Routledge, 2019), co-edited by Hande Gürses and Irmak Ertuna Howison, comprises essays that explore diverse issues such as speciecism, nonhuman agency, sovereignty, and trauma through a discussion of writers such as Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar and filmmakers such as Nuri Bilge Ceylan. Kim Fortuny's *Animals and the Environment in Turkish Culture: Ecocriticism and Transnational Literature* (I. B. Tauris, 2019) examines representations of land and animals in Turkish culture, by reading Turkish poets such as Nazım Hikmet alongside American and English writers to reveal common transnational concerns. Though not a work of literary criticism, *Transforming Socio-Natures in Turkey: Landscapes, States and Environmental Movements* (Routledge, 2019), co-edited by Onur İnal and Ethemcan Turhan, examines the ecological impacts of economic and political transformations through environmental humanities perspectives. Similarly, *Anadolu Turnaları: Biyoloji, Kültür, Koruma/Anatolian Cranes: Biology, Culture, Conservation* (Ürün, 2019), co-edited by Ufuk Özdağ and Gonca Gökalp Alpaslan, offers multidisciplinary perspectives on this endangered species in Turkey.

Currently, there is another important collected volume in the making: *Turkish Ecocriticism: From Neolithic to Contemporary Timescapes* (under contract with Lexington Books), co-edited by Serpil Oppermann and Sinan Akıllı. The essays in this collection examine ancient Anatolian civilizations and contemporary Turkish literature and culture through the lenses of posthumanism, new materialisms, environmental ethics, and critical animal studies. Another forthcoming book is Özlem Ögüt Yazıcıoğlu's *Shamanism in the*

Contemporary Novel (under contract with Lexington Books), which explores contemporary world novels thematizing shamanism and the ecological imagination, and includes a chapter on Bilge Karasu's and Buket Uzuner's works. In addition to literary and cultural analyses, many of the aforementioned scholars also offer theoretical perspectives on ecocriticism. Özdağ's work on restoration ecocriticism (Özdağ 2009), Oppermann's discussion of material ecocriticism (Iovino and Oppermann 2014), Öğüt Yazıcıoğlu's examination of animal alterity (Öğüt Yazıcıoğlu 2017), and Ergin's engagement with deconstructive ecocriticism (Ergin 2017) are a few examples of contributions to ecocritical theory.

The rising interest in Turkish ecocriticism is also evident in the increasing number of articles appearing in scholarly journals published in Turkey (e.g., Balık 2013; Budan 2017) and the special issues devoted to ecocriticism. In 2009, *Journal of American Studies of Turkey* put out a special issue titled *Ecocriticism*. While *Doğu Batı* (East West) published a special issue titled *Floraya Ağıt: Doğa* (Elegy to Flora: Nature) in 2018, *Cogito* presented an issue entitled *Yerküre Krizi, Dönüşen İnsan* (Crisis of Earth, Transformation of Human) in 2019, and *Monograf* (Monograph) published *Ekoloji* (Ecology) in 2020. Moreover, many presses have begun to publish Turkish translations of leading books in ecocriticism. Ertuğrul Genç's translation of Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism (Ekoeleştiri)*, 2016) and Duygu Dölek's translation of Timothy Morton's *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People (İnsan Türü: İnsan Olmayanlarla Dayanışma)*, 2020) are two examples.

In existing Turkish ecocritical scholarship, there is a prevailing preference for the novel over poetry. Although earlier ecocritical scholarship focused on a few poets like Melih Cevdet Anday (1915-2002) and Oktay Rifat (1914-1988), there has not been a comprehensive study of Turkish ecopoetics. Contemporary poets have only recently come to ecocritics' attention. The zine *cin ayşe* was the first to put together an issue on *Ekolojik Şiir* (Ecological Poetry) in 2015, placing the work of contemporary Turkish language poets such as Elif Sofya and Asuman Susam alongside the work of renowned avant-garde poets such as Susan Howe and Bernadette Mayer. This publication called for much overdue recognition of a diverse group of both earlier poets such as İlhan Berk (1918-2008) and Gülten Akin (1933-2015), and contemporary poets such as Anita Sezgener and Birhan Keskin, whose linguistic innovations redefine the relationship between poetry and ecology. Although there is now a growing body of work on Turkish poetry and environmental criticism, a theoretically informed discussion of ecopoetics in this particular geographical and cultural context has yet to take full form.

In the future, I anticipate there will be greater emphasis on the younger generation of writers who approach ecological issues from myriad poetic, philosophical, and political angles. Contemporary writers such as Faruk Duman, Deniz Gezgin, and Sema Kaygusuz are deservedly coming to the fore in critical scholarship as they propose new readings of pressing environmental concerns. As manifest in recent creative publications, literary ecology is growing more diverse in light of the environmental knowledge gained in the past few decades. As a result, specific questions pertinent to Turkey's geographical and ecopolitical landscape will receive more attention. Turkish ecocriticism has yet to delve deeper into issues such as climate crisis, drought, food insecurity, environmental

migration, energy politics, nuclear power, air and water pollution, environmental health, infrastructure development, and ecotourism.

Besides literature and criticism, contemporary Turkish film is also shifting its focus to crucial ecological issues. Examples include Umut Vedat's *Kara Atlas* (2015) (Dark Atlas), a documentary that focuses on the voices of resistance to existing and planned coal based power plants; Ceyda Torun's *Kedi* (2016) (*Cats*, 2017), a documentary about the street cats of İstanbul and human-animal encounters; Engin Türkyılmaz's *Gözyaşı Yolu* (2016) (Road of Tears), a documentary about the detriments of the "Green Road" project that will open the mountains of the Black Sea Region to tourism by connecting forty plateaus; Ayşegül Selenga Taşkent's *Ovacık* (2019) (*Ovacık*), a film about solidarity, sustainable agriculture and direct producer-to-consumer relations spearheaded by Fatih Mehmet Maçoğlu, the Mayor of Tunceli; and Can Candan's *Nuclear alla Turca*, a documentary-in-progress about Turkey's nuclear history.

Since most of the aforementioned environmental issues require interdisciplinary solutions, a number of university-based platforms have been formed to bring together researchers and practitioners. Ufuk Özdağ established the Land Ethic Research and Application Center at Hacettepe University (Ankara) in 2014. Dedicated to preserving the legacy of Aldo Leopold, the center was set up one year after Özdağ published the Turkish translation of Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (*Bir Kum Yöresi Almanığı*, 2013). The Department of Western Languages and Literatures at Boğaziçi University (İstanbul) has been organizing an annual conference titled "Interdisciplinary Ecological-Ethical Encounters" since 2017. Spearheaded by Özlem Ögüt Yazıcıoğlu, the conference brings together scholars, activists, and artists to form an international network. The first Environmental Humanities Center in Turkey was set up at Kapadokya University (Nevşehir) in 2019. Co-directed by Serpil Oppermann and Sinan Akıllı, the center runs a number of events and publishes a biannual, digital journal titled *Ecocene: Cappadocia Journal of Environmental Humanities*. Furthermore, many universities in İstanbul have established centers for interdisciplinary environmental research. Coordinated by Ümit Şahin, the climate change cluster at Sabancı University's İstanbul Policy Center (2001) aims to build networks and make policy recommendations to strengthen climate action. *Boğaziçi University Center for Climate Change and Policy Studies* (2014), directed by Levent Kurnaz, is a multidisciplinary network studying the impacts of climate change and policies in Turkey and the neighboring regions.

In addition to these interdisciplinary collaborations, independent media outlets that emerged from collective efforts have also played a vital role in fostering environmental awareness. The online newspaper *Yeşil Gazete* (Green Newspaper), which emerged from within Türkiye Yeşilleri (Turkey's Greens) in 2008 (Gürçay 2018), and Açık Radyo (Open Radio, 1995), a regional, not-for-profit radio station directed by founding member Ömer Madra, offer political, scientific, and artistic perspectives on various issues from climate crisis to animal rights. Creating democratic, participatory media venues for sharing information, they have greatly contributed to the formation of a critical mass of green citizens.

Indubitably, environmental issues are gaining more visibility in both academic and nonacademic circles in Turkey. The 16th İstanbul Biennial (2019) titled “The Seventh Continent,” organized by the İstanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts, is another manifestation of this visibility. While the Biennial gathered international artists and local organizations to discuss the Anthropocene, it was critiqued by environmental activists and participants in the Biennale performance titled “Petroleum” for receiving sponsorship from companies invested in the fossil fuel industry (“Bienal’in,” 2019). Such debates are welcome reminders of systemic challenges addressed by ecocritics and of the need to move toward a green economy to resolve human-induced ecological crises.

Submission received 24 December 2019

Revised version accepted 19 August 2020

Works Cited

- Balık, Macit. “Çevreci Eleştiri Işığında Latife Tekin’in Romanları.” *Acta Turcica Çevrimiçi Tematik Türkoloji Dergisi*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1-16.
- “Bienal’in Fosilci Sponsorlarına Bienal Performansıyla Yanıt.” *Yeşil Gazete*, 9 October 2019. yesilgazete.org/blog/2019/10/09/bienalin-fosilci-sponsorlarina-bienal-performansiyla-yanit/. Accessed 26 Jan. 2020.
- Budan, Cem Yılmaz. “Çevreci Eleştiri Bağlamında Yaşar Kemal’in *Kuşlar da Gitti* Romanı Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme.” *Bartın Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2017, pp. 3-20.
- Ecocriticism*, special issue of *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, no. 30, 2009.
- Ekoloji*, special issue of *Monograf*, no. 13, 2020.
- Ekolojik Şiir*, special issue of *cin ayşe*, no. 14, 2015.
- Ergin, Meliz. *The Eco-poetics of Entanglement in Contemporary Turkish and American Literatures*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.
- Floraya Ağıt: Doğa*, special issue of *Doğu Batı*, no. 83, 2018.
- Fortuny, Kim. *Animals and the Environment in Turkish Culture: Ecocriticism and Transnational Literature*. I. B. Tauris, 2019.
- Garrard, Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Routledge, 2004.
- . *Ekoeleştiri*. Translated by Ertuğrul Genç. Kolektif Kitap, 2016.
- Gözyaşı Yolu*. Directed by Engin Türkyılmaz, 2016. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcE90kmmLLo. Accessed 3 Oct. 2019.
- Gürçay, Ercüment. “[Babil’den Sonra] Yeşil Gazete 10 Yaşında.” *Yeşil Gazete*, 15 Sep. 2018. yesilgazete.org/blog/2018/09/15/babilden-sonra-yesil-gazete-10-yasinda/. Accessed 10 April 2019.
- Gürses, Hande, and Irmak Ertuna Howison, editors. *Animals, Plants, and Landscapes: An Ecology of Turkish Literature and Film*. Routledge, 2019.
- Iovino, Serenella, and Serpil Oppermann, editors. *Material Ecocriticism*. Indiana University Press, 2014.
- İnal, Onur, and Ethemcan Turhan, editors. *Transforming Socio-Natures in Turkey: Landscapes, States and Environmental Movements*. Routledge, 2019.

- Kara Atlas*. Directed by Umut Vedat, 2015.
- Kedi*. Directed by Ceyda Torun, Bir Film, 2016.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac*. Oxford University Press, 1949.
- . *Bir Kum Yöresi Almanacağı*. Translated by Ufuk Özdağ. Hacettepe Üniversitesi Yayınları, 2013.
- Morton, Timothy. *Humankind: Solidarity with Nonhuman People*. Verso, 2017.
- . *İnsan Türü: İnsan Olmayanlarla Dayanışma*. Translated by Duygu Dölek. Profil Kitap, 2020.
- Nuclear alla Turca*. Directed by Can Candan. Documentary film in-progress.
- Oppermann, Serpil, editor. *Ekoeleştiri: Çevre ve Edebiyat*. Phoenix, 2012.
- ., Ufuk Özdağ, Nevin Özkan and Scott Slovic, editors. *The Future of Ecocriticism: New Horizons*. Cambridge Scholars, 2011.
- ., and Sinan Akıllı, editors. *Turkish Ecocriticism: From Neolithic to Contemporary Timescapes*. Under contract with Lexington Books. Forthcoming.
- Ovacık*. Directed by Ayşegül Selenga Taşkent, Notus Film, 2019.
- Öğüt Yazıncıoğlu, Özlem. *Major Minor Literature: Animal And Human Alterity*. Simurg, 2017.
- . *Shamanism in the Contemporary Novel: Histories of Lands, Animals, and Peoples Beyond the Nature-Culture Divide*. Under contract with Lexington Books. Forthcoming.
- Özdağ, Ufuk. "An Essay on Ecocriticism in 'the Century of Restoring the Earth'." *Journal of American Studies of Turkey*, no. 30, 2009, pp. 125-142.
- . *Çevreci Eleştiriye Giriş: Doğa, Kültür, Edebiyat*. Ürün Yayınları, 2014.
- Özdağ, Ufuk, and Gonca Gökalp Alpaslan, editors. *Anadolu Turnaları: Biyoloji, Kültür, Koruma/Anatolian Cranes: Biology, Culture, Conservation*. Ürün Yayınları, 2019.
- Tekin, Latife. Interview by Semih Gümüş and Ömer Türkeş. "Latife Tekin'le Sözüünü Sakınmadan" (video). *Sabit Fikir*, İstanbul Modern Söyleşileri, 28 Dec. 2011. Available at www.sabitfikir.com/soylesi/latife-tekinle-sozunu-sakinmadan-video. Accessed 26 Jan. 2016.
- . Interview by Hasan Ali Toptaş. "Yazara Dil Gerekmez." *Egoist Okur*, 5 Jan. 2014. egoistokur.com/latife-tekin-ve-hasan-ali-toptas-bulusmasi-yazara-dil-gerekmez/. Accessed 12 May 2015.
- Yerküre Krizi, Dönüşen İnsan*, special issue of *Cogito*, no. 93, 2019.