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**Animals as an Element of Balance
in the Novels of Yasar Kemal**

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Animals as an Element of Balance in the Novels of Yasar Kemal

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Abstract

Yasar Kemal is one of the most important novelists in Turkey. In his novels, nature and animals have a crucial role concerning the atmosphere of his fictitious world. In the well-endowed geography of his novels, including lowlands and swamps, rocky mountains and forests, he always mentions various animals. Sometimes which seem only as a detail free from the plot or the atmosphere of the novel, occasionally some of them become almost a character. Sometimes via the oppositions and similarities between an animal and a character, the writer both enriches the psychological mood of the character and the narration. Hereby, animals outshine as a balance between “black” and “white”. In this article, functions of animals that suddenly appear in the novels of Yasar Kemal will be analyzed by focusing on “blue butterfly” in the novel *Hüyükteki Nar Ağacı*.

Keywords: Yasar Kemal, *Hüyükteki Nar Ağacı*, blue butterfly, bird, fish, similarity, opposition

Characters in the novels of Yasar Kemal are not alien to nature in moments when they fight against nature as well as in times when they benefit from it. In addition to these characters, who are aware of what is happening in their surrounding albeit all the negative conditions, animals were also reserved a place at the top. It was observed that animals, which sometimes seem as details in the abundant geography of Yasar Kemal's novels, stretching from plains to swamps, prairies to forests, and particularly bugs, are not just elements of depiction but ascribe important functions to the narrative. In this study, function of some animals, which suddenly appear in Yasar Kemal's novels, in narrative will be examined by concentrating on "blue butterfly" in novel titled *Hüyükteki Nar Ağacı* (The Pomegranate Tree on the Knoll).

Yasar Kemal seems as if he was talking about a dream which he's seen or he was writing a novel while mentioning nature in his childhood in his interviews with Alain Bosquet: "Colorful birds and butterflies of all sizes were flying like clouds. There were so many butterflies that in these places, birds and butterflies were blowing like winds the whole spring and autumn. The world was being swashed in such a riot of colors in a way that it is not possible to believe" (42). The author, who recognized "unbelievable" details of nature in his childhood, says that from then on, all my dreams have been filled with white clouds and colors" (42). He states that he even established a friendship with "red hornets", which give fear to many people, without keeping his eyes away from them. As if Yasar Kemal, who said that "Setting my eyes on and watching something for days without stopping was among the foremost childhood habits of mine", was just born to "watch without doing anything" in those days (43). Among what he watched, there are "hornets, wasps, honeybees", "beaded bees", grasshoppers, ants, "black and red eagles", partridges, butterflies, "colorful birds", flamingos and crop insects. Once, he found a "crop insect with green, blue and red hard shell" (43). He explains the red color that became visible under its wings while insect was flying as "it was shining by spreading lights". Collecting some of these bugs and making them fly, he watched that red color under their wings. He shows that bug to everyone in his village to get its name but no one knows its name.

Many years later, Yasar Kemal left his hometown behind and began to reflect nature of his childhood in his characters and to display bugs whose names are not familiar to him on his novels. He puts either a butterfly, a ladybird, a lizard or a bird on his characters' ways in his works when negative living conditions are gradually getting complicated and become unbearable. In this way he would demonstrate that they have never been alien to nature. If his character is in a position that will not be aware of what is happening in nature in that moment, then this time narrator gets into play and prevents us from losing our sense of space with a depiction of nature even at only one sentence. It can be said to be the case that an attitude regarding, which before anything else, life is not one-sided and incorporates all contrasts or human nature and "wild" nature can demonstrate similarities or contrasts, underlies such a narrative technique.

“Blue butterfly”, which suddenly appears in Yasar Kemal’s novel *The Pomegranate Tree on the Knoll*, is maybe the most beautiful example which shows that humans can establish a connection with nature even under the toughest conditions. In that novel, experiences of five friends named Aşık Ali, Hosuk, Memet, Memet the Kid and Yusuf, who leave their village for Cukurova to find a job, are narrated. Cukurova was not like they were dreamt about and they could not find the job they were looking for. Tractors replaced laborers in villages where they visited. Even more so, Yusuf became ill because of mosquitos and could barely walk. With fear and anxiety, they start to expect the death of Yusuf carried by Hosuk on his back.

They also began to discuss among themselves whether to return to their village. There isn’t even any “slightest whisper” on plain from anywhere and also soil turns to “gradually heated iron” (54). Suddenly, a butterfly appears on a place where they just sit and wait in this whole hopelessness, hunger, thirst and exhaustion:

A giant butterfly is staying still as if it is frozen on a pink hibiscus. Bending his neck, Memet thinks “man, what is this butterfly doing in this heat of God, this place where there is not a single drop of water...”

“Look” says by poking at Aşık Ali, “butterfly! It is inside this kiln where everywhere is scorching hot...”

“Oh my god,” surprises Aşık Ali, “I can’t believe it! Even really big like a bird... Who knows what brings it here.”

Hosuk:

“I am really surprised. Such a giant butterfly in this summer day. It is not moving at all. Maybe it is dead.”

“It is not dead” yells Yusuf. “Look, its wings are shining incessantly. There is no way it is dead.”

Yusuf coming to himself, alive by yelling in such a way makes them really happy. (54-55)

They comment on where this butterfly could be coming from and possibility of this non-moving butterfly being dead makes them concerned. Everybody forgot all their troubles and were engrossed in that blue butterfly. They expect a movement from the butterfly “without blinking”. As if that butterfly, which seemed to be dead, is a reflection of their own life. Therefore, they just settle looking at it from a distance and cannot dare to go towards butterfly to see whether it is alive. Only Memet the kid shows courage and goes toward butterfly:

While he was approaching butterfly and extending his hand, suddenly a scream nailed him at where he was and his hand just froze still. With Yusuf’s scream, butterfly rose above about a span and then landed where it was like nothing happened.

All of them jumped to their feet with joy after butterfly flew

Yusuf:

“It flew” says by smiling.

And others say:

“It flew”. (56)

We can also address this episode in terms of character, narrative and reader. Having examined in terms of character, it is observed that both an identicalness and a contrast are established between humans and nature. Five friends were in contrast with nature before the episode of butterfly. Burning hot weather of Cukurova, its mosquitos and drought in their village demonstrate that they are in a struggle against nature. Nature was the one who made Yusuf sick and also made seeds that were planted by Memet wither. With that butterfly, contrast between humans and nature is disrupted and a union is established. Characters identify themselves with butterfly, which suddenly appeared, and find themselves in it. As they just collapsed where they were with a half-dead state of mind and exhaustion, butterfly also froze still on hibiscus in the same way. Possibility of butterfly still being alive will as if determine their future, whether they will keep looking for a job or give up and return to their village. So, butterfly is undecided whether to fly or not. At one moment, he rises and then returns to where it was. Eventually, it just flies away and this triggers characters as well. Butterfly being alive has just provided to tired bodies of five friends a newly found power of walking to their village with a hope for a job and also even though temporarily revitalized Yusuf.

Looking at it from narrative aspect, we see that novel soon enough continues its “main” plot as if it never included the episode of butterfly. This episode, which seems to be non-relevant to plot at first glance, creates a contrast with rest of the book, thus standing out as an element of balance that ensures coherence. Similar contrasts also appear in some depictions that look like more ambiguous than the episode of butterfly: “Hens under shades of tractors of all sizes with a variety of colors and shapes with or without palettes on yards were walking their bally chicks by cackling” (58). In this depiction, even though narrating tractors and chickens side-by-side points to a contrast between the two, it also reveals imbalance between nature’s unique flow and negativities of modernizing life. In other words, imbalance and distortion between these two things are highlighted.

Looking at it from readers’ aspect, it is observed that pace of reading increases directly proportional to excitement of characters in the episode of butterfly, reading stops at the end of this episode and the text starts to ask questions to readers. For instance, Suha Oğuzertem drew attention to this episode of butterfly in introductory statement of a symposium titled “Yasar Kemal from Past to Present”, which was organized in Bilkent, and categorized questions that were kindled in him as follows:

Where is this butterfly coming from? Why is it there? What is its function? Why did our characters suddenly focus on a butterfly and make that butterfly an inevitable part of their life? [...] Well, what

happens if this butterfly does not exist? Can't they live without this butterfly? Why are hungry, exhausted, unemployed people who are away from their home and are helpless financially interested in a butterfly? What sort of relationship exists between their own fates and fate of that butterfly? Is there a relationship? (35-36).

As can be understood from questions of Oğuzertem, readers can concentrate their attention on this novel thanks to this episode, thereby being able to make better sense of the whole novel. Also, this episode is also important in terms of showing that we are not alone in nature and we can only see what is happening in our surrounding as long as we are careful.

The image of butterfly also appears in the *Ince Memed 2* (Memed, My Hawk 2) and the *Ince Memed 4* (Memed, My Hawk 4) differently albeit with less details. At the end of the 21st part of the *Ince Memed 2*, regret of Ince Memed is narrated due to some incidents. Ince Memed thinks that he is putting people surrounding him into trouble and causes them evil (146). The narration returns to Ince Memed at the beginning of Part 26 and it is stated that Memed senses a danger and he is really confused. Depiction drawn here carries similarities to depiction drawn before appearance of butterfly in the novel *Hüyükteki Nar Ağacı*: "Everything was really stagnant. There was not even a slightest whisper. Spring soil was stretching under the sun and slight rattles were coming from soil" (181). At this exact moment, Memed encounters a black butterfly: "A group of butterflies went by really high above him. A really black butterfly with red wingtips landed on giant blue flower before him. Memed was seeing a black, giant butterfly for the first time. Deep down, he felt something like fear and pain" (181). After seeing butterfly, Memed says to himself "your end is nigh". He blames himself for what happened to Hatçe, his mother and villagers: "Before me, everybody was living by in a simple way. I wish I shouldn't have existed. I wish I could just be damned" (181).

Here, as in *The Pomegranate Tree on the Knoll*, a character sharing negativity with nature through butterfly again is the case rather than nature giving a positive response to characters through butterfly while they were in a bad position. Again, an identicalness was established between a character and a butterfly and regret felt by Memed was solidified with an example of "black butterfly". As if Memed thinks that he is also sorry for butterfly being black. Narrative strikes a parallelism between character and nature by displaying on the one hand that butterflies with colorful connotations can also be black and on the other hand, Memed who is a good character can also cause some misdeeds.

Other butterfly images in the novel *Ince Memed 2* are narrated in the 37th, 40th and 50th episodes of novel. In the 37th episode, Muslu, Sari Suleyman and Ahmet murdering Mr. Ali Safa's man Zeynel is narrated. They captured Zeynel and brought him to the place where he will kill him. Again a seemingly non-related butterfly depiction comes into play amidst Zeynel's cries of "don't kill me": A giant, orange butterfly has landed on a blackberry offshoot, raised and glued its wings together and was stroking its giant blue head and bulging eyes

with its feet. Zeynel was only seeing this orange butterfly, its motion of stroking its eyes and its thin feet. Butterfly was never flying. Comfortably, it was just standing there” (292). Zeynel’s last cry of “do not kill me” is heard and three friends kill Zeynel by firing twice. Meanwhile, depiction of butterfly continues:

Orange butterfly landed because of noise of pistols, landed on a mullein and was taking off from there. It was landing and taking off repeatedly. Then, he fairly rose up, flew high on top of waterside thickets and flew away towards sunset by flying up and down.

Muslu said:

“He croaked”. (292-93)

As seen here, a contrast was established between character and nature rather than identicalness unlike previous example. Contrast between Zeynel’s shaking body with fear and comfortable position of butterfly also points to a contrast in Zeynel, who was also a poor villager, taking side of a landlord, who is oppressing villagers, rather than taking side of villagers.

Butterfly images covered in the episodes 40 and 50 of the novel resemble to two examples that we’ve given from *the Ince Memed 2*. In *the Ince Memed 4*, bees (106), frogs (23), a blue bird (26-29, 36), storks (29), ladybirds (22, 99, 107) and snakes accompany butterflies (22, 106). Ince Memed is depicted in a state of questioning and mental accounting in the second part of the novel. Memed thinks about what people, who kill each other and become happy when they hear about death of their enemies, want from “this mortal world”. As if he lost his belief on brigandage (14). Against this, he even considers a snake, of which he is very afraid, a good luck: “It is good luck when a person encounters a snake” (15). Meanwhile, piston in his hand bursts and accidentally kills a snake. Since it has just killed his luck, “he freezes, his face turns really white and his heart is madly racing”. He just feels a fear of which he has not known so far (15). Meanwhile, he is continuing to think. He wants to drop his pistol, hits the road and returns to village like everybody but this would not be possible for him to do due to siege (16). After a while, bullet noises spread everywhere. While running, Memed is bit by a black snake. For a long period, he could not move but he does not care about it at all (21). When gunshots cease, he sees a “giant blue butterfly with white spots” (22). Butterfly flies and flies around, eventually landing on Memed’s hand. Memed tries not to move his hand and to breathe loudly to prevent butterfly from flying up. Butterfly stays still without any move. After a while, gunshots began to be heard again. Memed quits watching and being interested in that butterfly and fends off it by moving his hand. While gunshots are lasting, this time he sees a ladybird on barrel of his rifle. “This is a great luck” says Memed but he does not care. Soon after, bug just flies away. Afterwards, he sees numerous ladybirds gathered together on a thorn. He sits beside and begins to watch them. He has started to see every animal and bug he saw as good luck: he became hopeful saying “I wish to God that there would be something, a goodness, a prosperity in these

snakes, that butterfly, bird that landed on my head – albeit a bird has never landed on my head – and in these ladybirds” (22).

This narration, which mostly consists of depictions, demonstrates that contrast is established between a ladybird and rifle rather than between snake and ladybird. Nature with its snake on the one hand and its butterflies as well as ladybirds on the other is in a harmony and coherence with nature of Ince Memed. The ones, who are after him and want death, are contrasts. Besides, the narrator drawing attention to the fact that Ince Memed assumes that a bird has landed on his head and regards it as a good luck solidifies identicalness established between Ince Memed and nature.

In *the Ince Memed 1*, we encounter ants and lizards as elements that ensure to establish identicalness with character. In the second part of this novel, there is a narrative of a kid, who run away from oppressions in his village and is running breathlessly. For a moment, he catches sight of ants in a place where he lied down to rest: “Ants are big. They are joyfully commingling at the tip of anthill. For a moment, he forgot everything and was engrossed in ants. And suddenly he jumped when it occurred to him” (12). While the kid was continuing to run with all his exhaustion, after a while a little lizard appeared: “His feet were being tangled in each other. Running in this way, he caught sight of a tiny lizard on a tree. He became content without any reason. When lizard saw him, he escaped under that tree” (13). These examples demonstrate that the kid in the Ince Memed is not alien to nature even under toughest conditions and takes strength to bear bad incidents caused by nature and to escape his problems albeit for a moment as shown in characters in *The Pomegranate Tree on the Knoll*.

In his study titled “Nature and Existence in Cukurova Novels by Yasar Kemal”, Barry Tharaud addresses the novel Ince Memed 1 and analyses depictions in that novel. According to Tharaud, “a general overlap is observed between natural world and human world in Yasar Kemal’s novels. Something that is relevant for natural world is also relevant for human world” (93). Tharaud states that nature in Yasar Kemal’s novels emerged “as something which corresponds to human mind”. What Tharaud means by corresponding should not be something other than identicalness which we think to be established between characters and animals. However, as we have also mentioned above, nature in works of Yasar Kemal does not only reflect a character’s consciousness. It is sometimes included in a way that will create contrast with a character’s consciousness or state of mind. As seen in the episode “blue butterfly” in *The Pomegranate Tree on the Knoll*, even though an identicalness between characters and nature is mentioned, sometimes this identicalness can create a contrast with the whole novel.

In *the Undying Grass* (Ölmez Otu), which is the last book of Yasar Kemal’s *the Other Side of the Mountain* (Dağın Öte Yüzü) Trilogy, one of the elements that are in a relationship of identity or contrast with character is “fish”. At the beginning of this novel, rage felt by Memidik towards Muhtar Sefer is depicted. Memidik wants to kill Muhtar Sefer to get revenge of beating that he got. He resembles Mr. Sevket, whom he saw in the dark, to Sefer and

chases him to kill. But, whenever he approaches to kill him, his hands start to shake and he drops the knife out of his hand:

He shifts behind oleander by walking on tiptoes. Grasping the handle of his knife, he again freezes while jumping onto shadow [silhouette of Mr. Sevki] and suddenly dropped down after catching a fever of tremble.

A big, scaled fish in front of that shadow jumps onto water three times with his belly shining under moonlight. The shadow lifts his head and looked at fish. Then, he threw a pebble stone to the spot where the fish rushed.

Memid's rage was getting more intense, swearing himself. Hope his hand would be able, he should not have been frozen and trembled so much! Now, he should have approached and stuck the knife in his hand fully to his back exactly on his heart... (10)

Here, fish that is narrated to jump out of water three times is similarly repeated in following pages of the text. Fish seems to want to tell something to Mr. Sevki. However, its constant jumping out of water could not be enough to draw attention of Mr. Sevki. A contrast was established between Mr. Sevki, who were not aware of what is going to happen and thus seemed calm, and fish, which was jumping out of water. This contrast is also the case Mr. Sevki and Memidik who is trembling from fear and rage. However, sufficient hint is not provided in the text regarding that an identicalness is established between fish and Memidik. Nonetheless, other depictions of nature that suddenly appear in the novel and seem non-relevant point to the fact that no matter how much Memidik is angry, he can still observe his surrounding. These depictions have the quality to prove the idiom "not being able to see anything because of anger" wrong.

Lastly, we can dwell upon swan image in *the Birds have also Gone: Long Stories* (Kuşlar da Gitti). The novel was set up on children, who occupy themselves with catching birds for "Azat Buzat", an old tradition from Istanbul. According to this tradition, people are expected to purchase birds in cage and set them free in order to gain good deed. However, children could not sell birds as they used to and people are no longer interested in this old tradition. Towards the end of this novel, children go to Taksim to sell birds as a last resort. Suleyman was sitting somewhere in the midst of all that crowd of Taksim and looking at his surrounding due to sorrow from not being able to sell birds. He catches sight of "a blue meatball vendor cart". The narrator starts to depict the picture on the side of cart through the eyes of Suleyman:

Pink flowers were ornamented around blue color; enchanted orange-eyed flowers that we've never seen and maybe that have never flourished in this world... A lake was clanking under light between green and blue under a white ball of cloud right in the middle of flowers. A total of seven magnificent swans with long necks were

swimming in the lake. Red and purplish flowers flourished all the way on the coast of the lake and again an out of this world cane was swinging (115).

Birds "from this world" which were waiting to be sold in cage and agonizing because they were crammed and filled in cages on the one hand and on the other hand "out of this world" swans which were frozen in a picture with an infinite calmness were reserved a place as primary elements that create contrast here. The fact that Suleyman quit being interested in birds in cages and has established an identity with swans in the picture can be seen as a detail that prepared for the end of this novel. At the end of this novel, children kill birds which could not be sold in order to stubbornly prove that they are not like people who are not interested in birds and they have not been alienated. When they did this, in a way they have fallen in the same position as those people. Swan in the picture is an indication regarding contrast between capturing birds and setting them free on the one hand and on the other hand that maybe birds have gone and we can only see them in pictures.

Consequently, we can say that animals which seem non-relevant to plot or atmosphere in Yasar Kemal's novels sometimes quit being an element of depiction and almost turn into a character and sometimes enrich state of mind that characters experience as well as narration via contrasts and identities that they establish with characters, thus standing out as an element of balance between "black" and "white". In this study, we were able to address several animal images that constitute only a small portion of Yasar Kemal's universe. Of course, being able to better analyze the relationship that he establishes with nature will require looking at all animals in nature without distinguishing them and much more extensively close readings.

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