Translating Surfaces: A Dual Critique of Modernity in Sabahattin Ali's *Kürk Mantolu Madonna*

By Kristin Dickinson



Rudolf Schlichter, "Hausvogteiplatz" (1926)

A trailblazer in the genre of social realism in Turkey, Sabahattin Ali was a leading author of the early Republican period.[1] Based on his diverse experiences, Ali's novels

[1] The early Republican period refers to the single party period of the Turkish Republic and the first four years of the multi-party system (1923–50). Social realism developed out of the nationalist literature of the very early Republican era (approximately 1923–32), which was often allegorical in nature. Representatives of social realism strove for a realistic portrayal of daily life; the short stories of Sait Faik, for example, depict in beautiful detail the life of Istanbul's lower classes and ethnic minorities. The novels of writers such as Orhan Kemal and Yaşar Kemal grew out of the social realist

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and short stories cover a diverse range of subject matters, from the social fabric of rural Anatolian life to the intellectual and bohemian circles of pre-World War II Istanbul. Well read in Marxist literature, Ali was a committed socialist, and was often imprisoned for his criticism of the state and the single party system, yet his literary texts rarely contained outright political commentary. Drawn to social outsiders and lonesome figures on the margins of society, Ali weaves socially critical information into these characters' inner monologues, identity crises and ill-fated love stories, creating a form of social commentary his good friend and fellow author Pertev Naili Boratav described as psychological realism.[2]

Kürk Mantolu Madonna (The Madonna in the Fur Coat, Madonna im Pelzmantel)[3] is an excellent example of how such diverse elements come together in Ali's work. At the core of its intercultural narrative is a love affair between the young and naïve Turkish character Raif and the German-Jewish painter, Maria. The relationship between these two relatively isolated, socially marginal characters develops throughout their long walks in the city and its most famous park, the *Tiergarten*. While these characters never discuss politics—at one point Raif even states that the very thought of politics is "repugnant" to him (zuwider 72 / sıkılmaya başladım 52)—their story forms the basis for a critique of Turkish modernity[4] through a critical engagement with Weimar surface culture.[5] This critique comes into being through internal and external narratives that take place in Berlin and Ankara, respectively.

World Literature and the Textualization of Europe

Recorded in a small black notebook hidden deep in Raif's desk drawer, the internal narrative of *Madonna* tells the story of Raif's youth in Weimar Berlin. Spanning the years between the founding of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and the official end of the Weimar Republic in 1933, it invites intercultural comparison. Yet Raif himself is no cultural ambassador; his extremely introverted personality leads him to shun contact with others. As a result, colleagues even doubt the validity of his German skills, despite his position as a German to Turkish translator at an Ankara bank. Raif's character nevertheless serves as a theoretical reflection on the concept of translatability. In contrast to the mundane quality of Raif's everyday work, his experiences cannot simply be transferred at face value; they require a more complex process of internalization, which is finally fulfilled by the narrator's decision to *read* Raif's life story.

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movement, but their focus on rural Anatolia established the village novel as a genre in its own right. Sabahattin Ali's work does not fall perfectly into either of these categories, but was influenced by, and influenced both.

[2] For an insightful discussion of this term in relation to Ali's work, see Erika Glassen's afterword to the German translation of *Icimizdeki Şeytan* (Der Dämon in uns).

[3] David Gramling and İlker Hepkaner's English translation of Madonna is currently under review with Syracuse University Press; Ute Birgi-Knellessen's German translation was published by Doerlemann Verlag in 2008. The novel has also been translated into French (2007), Russian (2010), Albanian (2010) and Croation (2012).

[4] My reading is in contrast to earlier interpretations of this novel. See for example, Siedel: "Obwohl Sabahattin Ali zu der Zeit, als der Roman entstand, mehr denn je an den aktuellen gesellschaftlichen und politischen Auseinandersetzungen teilnahm, war Kürk Mantolu Madonna kein gesellschaftkristischer Roman. Vielmehr knüpfte der Autor damit an seine frühere mystische Tendenz an" (46).

[5] For an in depth discussion of Weimar surface values see Janet Ward: *Weimar Surfaces: Urban Visual Culture in 1920s Germany.*

Juxtaposed to this act of reading is Raif's "reading" of Europe through works of literature in translation. Caught up in a world of his imagination, the youthful Raif "devours" (verschlingen 66/ kasıp kavurmak 49) works of Russian and French literature to escape the political reality of war-torn Turkey in the years following WWI. Yet his obsession with reading novels in translation is anything but apolitical; on the contrary, it holds specific historical significance for the development of the modern Turkish Republic.

Founded on a model of modernization as Westernization, the Turkish Republic was underscored by different modalities of translation, including the initiation of a "Dünya Edebiyatı" or world literature in translation series that was meant to transfer humanist values to Turkish culture.[6] This project was made possible through the establishment of a state funded translation bureau, which was active between 1940–50.[7] Amidst this very systematized government-run translation project, leading scholars of the early Republican period criticized late Ottoman translation movements for superficially importing European literary genres and ideals.[8] Republican criticism—which was tied to larger nation building projects that felt the need to assert a clean break from the Ottoman Empire—accused *Tanzimat* scholars/authors of merely copying the West through inadequate translations, and for their haphazard and *incomplete* selection of texts to translate. What this rhetoric suggested, is that a "complete" translation of Western literature and/or Western culture was possible. Indeed, leading scholars of the 1940s coined terms such as "tam Avrupa" (Europe in its completeness)[9] to designate a canon of timeless, world literary texts, and "tam tercüme" (complete translation),[10] which perpetuated an image of the West as a fixed, monolithic entity that could be "translated" at face value. Thus even while attempting to establish an original Turkish identity, this kind of discourse inevitably led to an understanding of the "West" as originary, in relation to which Turkish translations were seen as both derivative and belated.

Sabahattin Ali participated in the Kemalist modernization process through his position as a state-employed translator of German texts for this world literature series.[11] In contrast to the prevailing translation discourse, however, the intercultural narrative in *Madonna*—which was written in 1943 at the height of the series' success—stages an alternative conception of world literature as a method of critical reading, as opposed to a set object of study.

The disjunct between Raif's textual experience of Europe and his lived experience in Weimar Berlin can be read within this context:

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[6] Additional significant reforms include 1) the Alphabet Reform (1928), which replaced the Perso-Arabic script with the Latin script and 2) ongoing language reforms throughout the 1930s that sought to purify Turkish by purging foreign vocabulary (largely Arabic and Persian) from the language.

[7] The translation project was overseen by the minister of culture Hasan Ali Yücel, and produced 676 literary translations over a period of 10 years.

[8] In the *Tanzimat*, or "reorganization" period of the Ottoman Empire (1839–76), a series of state-sponsored modernizing reforms modeled largely on European practices marked an important paradigm shift in the history of Ottoman translation. Whereas literary translations had previously been largely from Arabic and Persian poetry, the Tanzimat period saw the first translations from Western European source texts, which introduced new genres such as the novel, the short story and literary criticism into the emerging field of modern Turkish literature.

[9] Ismail Habib, *Avrupa Edebiyatı ve Biz: Garpten Tercümeler*. İstanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1940: VII.

[10] Himli Ziya Ülken, *Uyanış devirlerinde tercümenin rolü*. İstanbul: Ülken Yayınları, 1997: 349.

[11] Among the authors Ali translated were Goethe, Kleist, Schiller, Lessing, E.T.A. Hoffmann, Heinrich Mann and Thomas Mann. He also translated Greek classics from German into Turkish.

> Ultimately, this was just another city. A city with wider streets—much cleaner, and with blonder people. But there was nothing about it that would make a person swoon with awe. For my part, I was still unaware what kind of a thing the Europe of my dreams had been, and how much the city I was now living in lacked, in comparison to that image… It had not yet dawned on me how the mind can produce the most stupendous projections of all.[12]
>
> Burası da en nihayet bir şehirdi. Sokakları biraz daha geniş, çok daha temiz, insanları daha sarışın bir şehir. Fakat ortada insanı hayretinden düşüp bayılmaya sevk edecek bir şey de yoktu. Benim hayalimdeki Avrupa'nın nasıl bir şey olduğunu ve şimdi içinde yaşadığım şehrin buna nazaran ne noksanları bulunduğunu kendim de bilmiyordum...Hayatta hiçbir zaman kafamızdaki kadar harikulade şeyler olmayacağını henüz idrak etmemiştim. (51)

Implicit to Raif's disappointment is a localization of Europe at large in Weimar Berlin. Rather than a disjuncture between the realms of imagination and reality, this suggests a critique of the Turkish Republican attempt to textualize Europe, in order to translate it in its entirety. The text of Raif's life story stands in contrast to this rhetoric, by posing the more difficult question of what it means to be "German:" when the narrator of the frame narrative first glimpses Raif's black notebook, Raif dismisses it as a "German novel" (Deutscher Roman, 19), and hides it in his desk drawer. While this statement is clearly a lie, the narrative invites its readers to consider this "lie" as a truth.

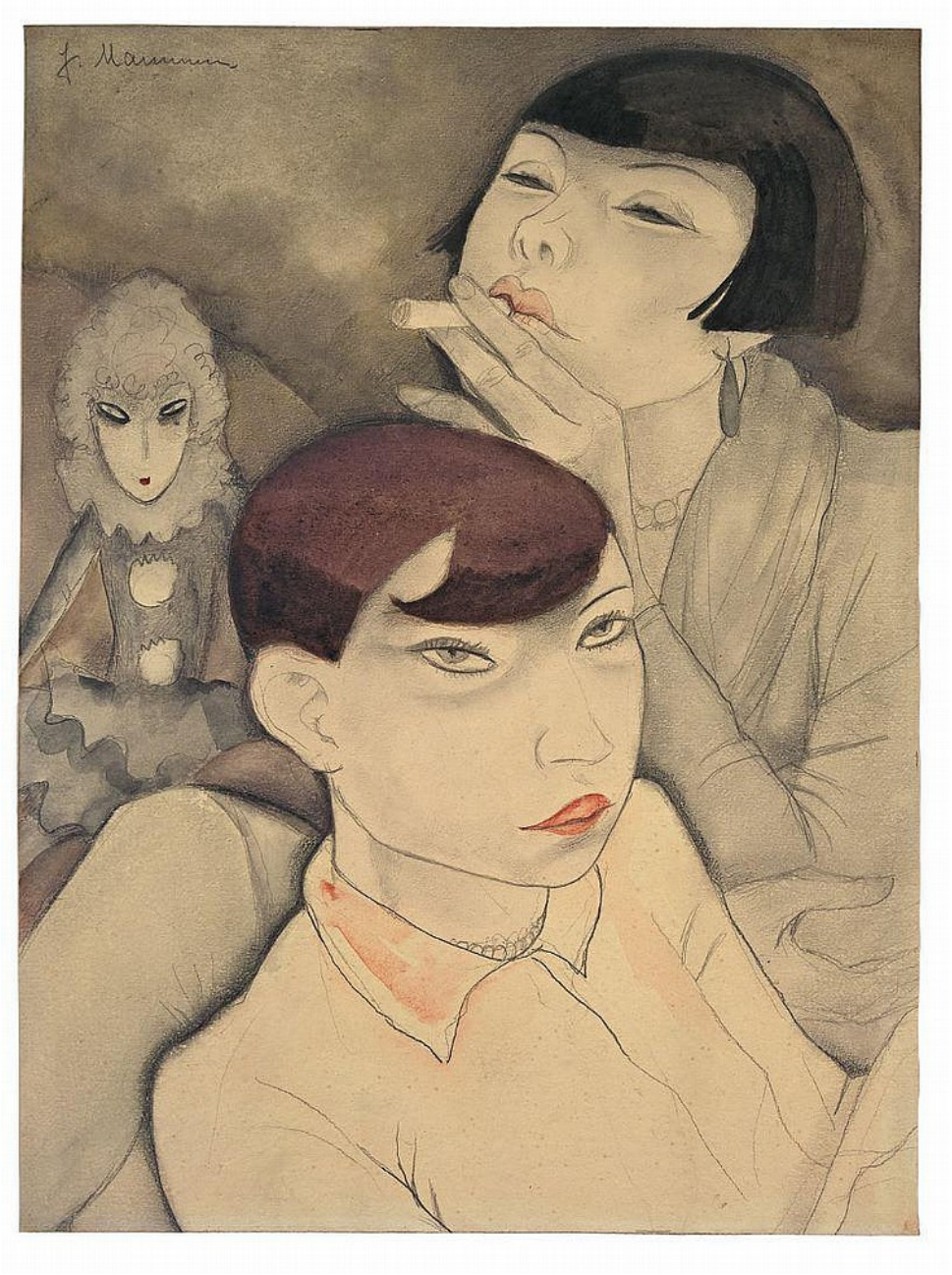
In the following, I argue that the intercultural story line of *Madonna* provides an alternative way for Ali to take part in the world literature series he translated for. Rather than simply transferring a series of canonical German texts into Turkish, Ali produces a "Turkish" literary critique of German modernity that asks to be considered as "German." That the complexity of Ali's intercultural narrative only comes to the fore through the narrator's *reading* of Raif's life story suggests a conception of world literature not only as a process of cross-cultural exchange, but also as a method of reading that demands intense self-examination.

Behind the Façade of Civilization: Translating Weimar Surfaces to Republican Ankara

As the internal narrative of *Madonna* progresses, Raif's experiences in Weimar Berlin become localized to an extreme, and the German-Jewish character Maria with whom he falls in love becomes the sole lens through which he sees Berlin. Maria's historically significant position as a young, female artist, together with her independent, headstrong character and self-declared feminism, lends her the defining features of the *neue Frau* of the time. As is well known, in addition to low-level white-collar professions, the *neue Frau* of the 1920s also began entering the fields of journalism and the visual arts. This created new opportunities for Weimar women to contribute to their own self-representation in a public realm from which they had historically been largely excluded. The problematics of such self-representation are clearly addressed through Raif's first and only encounter with Maria's artwork when he views her self-portrait, "Die Madonna im Pelzmantel," at an exhibition of "modern

[12] All English citations from *Madonna* are taken from Gramling and Hepkaner's forthcoming translation.

paintings." What is significant in this encounter is that Raif is so transfixed by Maria's framed image, that he fails to recognize her in person. For Raif, Maria is her portrait—and it is first and foremost the portrait that Raif falls in love with.



Jeanne Mammen, "Langweilige Puppen" (Boring Dolls, 1929)

In an exhibition of paintings clearly coded as Verist—or the Left Wing of *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, which was coined by Gustav Hartlaub in 1923—the strict realism of Maria's portrait stands out. Amidst unproportional paintings with glaring colors, Maria's work contains absolutely no traces of "beautification" (güzelleştirme 57) or "intentional disfigurement" (inadına çirkinleştirme 57), and seems closely in line with the right wing of the *Die Neue Sachlichkeit*, often referred to as Magic Realism. Largely void of political tendencies, Magic Realism is often identified with the post WWI "return to order;" painters expressed a rejection of avant-garde movements through a return to more traditional, or classical influences. Indeed, Maria's painting

is modeled after the 1517 painting *Madonna delle Arpie* (Madonna of the Harpies) by the Florentine artist Andrea del Sartos. In stark contrast to Expressionism, Magic Realism strove for an objective portrayal of reality, and a clarity of representation marked by acute attention to detail.

Read within the larger context of the novel, this desire for transparency reveals key tensions in Maria's character. As an image of herself, Maria's painting seems to embody the central goal of the New Objectivity through its unity of form and content. What it puts into question, however, is how her characteristic embodiment of the *neue Frau*, lives up to her self-depiction as a motherly, religious icon. This question is historically important, as increased employment opportunities for women also gave rise to a female consumer culture that was largely fueled by a desire for new-self images. The fashion industry was one important way in which such desires were met—loose, practical clothing downplayed traditional physical characteristics of femininity. Yet Maria's fur coat and low-cut white evening gown stand in contrast to the functionality of daytime fashions. Symbolic of her side job as a cabaret singer, they reflect night fashions of the time, revealing a societal anxiety about the androgyny of the *Neue Frau*. Raif's utter disappointment with this image of Maria is telling. Observing the way in which she interacts with male customers, Raif first notices her forced smile and obvious aversion to her situation. That Maria's face disguises her true emotions supports Sabine Hake's argument that night styles dramatized "older assumptions about female beauty and eroticism through its use of the mask" (189).

These multiple competing images that make up Maria's character are significant in that the stylization of the New Woman was integral to Weimar modernization in general, as the bringing together of beauty and industry represented a match of form and function crucial to the new objectivity of the time period (Ward 83). Ali's portrayal of Maria thus points to a profound tension in the surface value of Weimar Modernity.

Ali brings his focus on Weimar surfaces to bear on Kemalist modernity through the use of a frame narrative that takes place in Ankara. As the new capital of modern Turkey, Ankara became an important Republican icon. Publications in the early era of the Republic represented Ankara metaphorically as both the heart and the mother of the nation, due to its geographic centrality and its symbolic status as a city that was built and modeled with the founding of the Republic. The newness and cleanliness of Ankara was contrasted with portrayals of Istanbul as old-fashioned and unclean; the order of Ankara's streets was pitted against the chaos of the historic capital city of the Ottoman Empire; and the idealism of the new republic was held up against an older tradition of dynasty and decadence (Bozdoğan 67).

Such sentiments were particularly strong in the heightened nationalism of the 1940s during which Ali wrote *Madonna*, making his depictions of Ankara all the more noteworthy. Raif moves to Ankara only as a last resort, and Ankara holds anything but a promising future for him: he is disregarded by his colleagues and largely used by his family for monetary support. His residence on the outskirts of the city further attests to his low economic status, and offers an image of the capital city that stands in stark contrast to official representations:

> I passed through narrow neighborhoods with damaged sidewalks, very unlike Ankara's asphalted boulevards. Ascents and descents followed upon one another. At the end of a very long road, almost at the edge of the city, I took a

> left, and got directions to the house from the customers of a coffeehouse: A yellow, two-story building, standing alone among the sand and rocks.
>
> Ankaranın asfalt döşeli yollarına hiç benzemiyen bozuk kaldırımlı dar mahalleleri geçtim. Birbiri arkasına yokuşlar ve inişler vardı. Uzun bir yolun sonunda, adeta şehrin bittiği yerlerde, sola saptım ve köşedeki kahveye girerek evi öğrendim: taş ve kum yığılı arsaların arasında tek başına duran iki katlı, sarı boyalı bir bina. (24)

Raif later apologizes for the derelict character of his neighborhood, and explains to the narrator that the housing crisis in Ankara has forced him to live outside the city center. Ali thus portrays the ideal of Ankara as unattainable for the Turkish population at Raif's income level. As such, Ankara could be read as one "facade" of the modern nation, behind which a different image of life in the republic exists.

Reading this portrayal of Ankara against Raif's experiences in Weimar Berlin reveals not simply a critique of the Kemalist project, but also the "Western" ideals upon which it was based. The Kemalist model of modernization as Westernization aimed at fully adopting European values rather than merely the façade of Western civilization. In the goal of "becoming" European, leading reformers of the early Republic warned against the dangers of mimicking, or superficially imitating Western Europe. The goal, instead, was for Turkey to emerge as an independent political entity that identified itself as European, as opposed to a mere "copy" of the West. In response to this rhetoric, Ali poses the difficult question of what "Western" values themselves might be: the distinction between fully adopting modern European ideals as opposed to the "façade" of European civilization is thoroughly complicated when those ideals are themselves revealed to be largely perpetuated through surface images.



The "New Kemalist Woman"

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