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## A MYTHICAL APPROACH TO YAŞAR KEMAL'S NOVELS: AĞRI DAĞI EFSANESİ AND YER DEMİR GÖK BAKIR

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### Abstract

The novella written by Yaşar Kemal titled *Ağrı Dağı Efsanesi* and the novel *Yer Demir Gök Bakır* are literary texts about the creation of myths and the local people's attitude towards these myths. Emphasis is placed on the belief of the local people where there is no hope in their lives, as well as the importance of setting and the characters' motives in both texts. In this study, based on Cuddon's definition, the samples of mythical motives and the mythical elements presented in the texts were put into two different groups; one being supernatural beings and the other being supra-human beings. The influence of the myths on the people in their lives is the main focus in the literary texts written by the same author, Yaşar Kemal.

**Keywords:** Yaşar Kemal, *Ağrı Dağı Efsanesi*, *Yer Demir Gök Bakır*, Myths, Archetypes.

### 1. Introduction

It will be appropriate to begin with a quotation taken from Brett that will be the good answer to such questions as why do human beings need mythology? And is it possible for human beings to survive without any myths? Brett points out that "[m]an needs a mythology not only to satisfy his emotional needs, but also to order his thinking, and myth is a product of the interplay between *poema* and *logos*. (Brett 1976:34)

The aim of this study is to research the mythical elements in Yaşar Kemal's novels. Is there specific reason to use such devices as legends and dreams in his novels without any mythical motifs? Would his novels be worth reading without them? Are the readers satisfied with such mythical images after reading the novels? Such questions will be taken into consideration throughout the analysis of this study.

The term "myth" is defined in *MacMillian Contemporary Dictionary* as "traditional story of unknown authorship that expresses a belief of a particular people, usually involving gods and heroes. A myth is an attempt to explain a phenomenon of nature, an event in history or the origin of a particular custom, practice, or religious belief stories collectively" (1979: 671).

Another definition given for "myth" by Lauter is as follows "the modality wherein we consciously mediate between fiction and belief, between language and whatever it is that lies beneath or beyond language" (Lauter, 1984:2).

Brelich, as cited in Kirk, gives the definition of the term "mythology" as follows: "mythology has gradually revealed that it can not be reduced to the same plane as the other fundamental forms of religion, if not indeed as their ultimate source" (Kirk, 1970:11).

A myth can be any imaginary thing that is totally unknown to the people or a complex story which is viewed differently than any other objects in the world. Exaggerated, in fact impossible characteristics are attributed to such creations in the figure of a human being or a thing. Stories repeated for generations relating to a particular hero or event serve as legends in different cultures. Therefore we have different collections of myths that can be studied separately such as, Asian Mythology or Egyptian Mythology.

It is known that all myths are based on the religious beliefs of the people in a given speech community. Many myths involve a belief in supernatural creatures, folktales, universal impossibilities and fantastic actions. Most myths originate from rituals. Although some historians argue on this specific issue, the rituals stand for a motif. Kirk emphasizes his opinion using a quotation of Pyton saying that "it is undeniable that myths are closely attached to rituals. In fact, if a story has not been associated with cult or ritual... it is better not to call it myth, but legend or folktale" (Kirk, 1970:15).

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The myth critic, as Guerin et al., state "is concerned to seek out those mysterious elements that inform certain literary works, and that elicit, with almost uncanny force, dramatic and universal human reactions" (Guerin et al.,1986:155). They further point out that the "myth critic probes for the inner spirit which gives that form its vitality and its enduring appeal" (Guerin et al., 1986:164).

Myth criticism requires the knowledge of other disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, and cultural history. Jung's contribution to myth criticism is undeniable. He followed Freudian theories and analysis, but originated a new model reflecting his original ideas and thoughts -later called archetypes- on personal unconscious. Freud and Jung agreed that "more complex psychic predispositions are inherited by human beings". Jung believed that "mind is not born as a *tabula rasa*" which means a clean slate. It has the unique features of an individual that can be different from other people. In other words, it is like a body forming behaviour.

The first mythical writings emerged in Greece. There are three words to express the word "parole", act of speaking, in Greece. Those are "mythos", "epos" and "logos". Among those words "mythos" means that a story or legend must be heard from somebody and transferred by speech to someone else. Therefore, "mythos" may not have any value for a historian, even for Herodotus, a myth does not reflect any reality concerning human life. It may be a false, nonsensical and ridiculous story, legend or tale.

Jung, as cited in Kirtunç, draws a similarity between archetypes and instincts saying that these two themes are innate to human beings. For him, archetypes move around in the common unconscious of human beings taking the shape of psychological experiences and symbols that come from ancient time, just as river beds make flood water run down in a definite route (Kirtunç, 1994:16).

Kirtunç further says that "It is difficult to understand archetypes, because they are not the reality of the world as perceived through the power of our brains, but the reality of unconscious, which is a common cultural inheritance of human beings (Kirtunç, 1994:16).

To apply mythical criticism to a literary text in the light of above quotations by Kirtunç, two of Yaşar Kemal's novels *Ağrı Dağı Efsanesi* and *Yer Demir Gök Bakır* were chosen and examined from the myth criticism point of view. There was no specific reason in choosing the famous writer Yaşar Kemal's novels except that the titles of his novels evoke the legend of "Mount Ararat" and make one wonder how the ground can be "iron" and the sky "copper".

It has been observed that in those two novels the writer develops his stories around mythical motives and actions of the main characters in order to create a rich mystical environment and draw the vivid attention of the readers. The story may be well known by people in Turkey, but there are lots of dense images that make the reader think about how people obey or react to the traditional customs and beliefs created by their own culture and that one day they might be the victim of their own traditional customs or the products of their myths.

Cuddon states that "In general a myth is a story which is not 'true' and which involves (as a rule) supernatural beings or at any rate supra-human beings" (Cuddon, 1979:408). In the light of above quotation, the mythical motives and figures in two texts were put into two different groups; one being supernatural beings and the other being supra-human beings.

## **2. Mythical Motifs in *Ağrı Dağı Efsanesi***

The main mythical element in *Ağrı Dağı Efsanesi* is the white horse of a sultan of the Ottoman Empire. The white horse escapes from its barn, and comes to a village and stands in front of the house of Ahmet, an ordinary villager, who like other shepherds in that region, plays the shepherd's pipe very well. The horse then waits all night without moving. The main concept is that if a horse comes to your door, it is a gift from God that nobody can take back not even if its owner is a ruler or governor, in the highest ranks of the ruling body. Turning away a horse that was perceived as a gift given by God meant extreme shame or dishonor to the returner. According to the traditional custom if the horse is sent away and returns to the same place three times the one who sent it away is so shameful as to deserve death. Besides that fact, if you give it back, it means that it will be the cause of bad luck for all people living nearby, in fact for the whole universe. The following are some repeated sentences taken from his novel that reflect the elements of supernatural beings in his book.

"The mountain was walking to the sound of the shepherd's pipe. The cliffs, the avalanche, the cold night, the stars were exploding. The moonlight was exploding. And the whole mountain was walking with its all anger. It was breathing heavily" (Kemal, 1997:14).

The objects in the above lines are not extra-ordinary but the actions attributed to them, are supernatural. We know that a mountain is unable to walk or breathe and that cliffs never explode unless they experience an earthquake or similar catastrophe. Later, it is understood that the white horse belongs to the Mahmut Khan, the

Pasha of Beyazıt which creates a conflict. Although Mahmut Khan knows that he has no right to have his horse back according to the traditional norms, he nevertheless insists on awarding fifty gold pieces to the finder of his horse (Kemal, 1997:18).

The warning of the Pasha by his men also reflects the mythical expression as "Do not trust the mountain behind you. I'll beat the mountain and the people on the mountain" (Kemal, 1997:18). It is clear even at the beginning of the book that the mountain is the "mythos". It is the mountain that sends rain to the plains to produce the nicest grain and different kind of plants; it is again the mountain that saves the lives of sick children and old people. The mountain Ararat in the novel is considered as being a supernatural creature that has unique power over people and the universe.

In this text, there is an old and knowledgeable man with a long, white beard called Sofi. The name of this man acts as an indication of the "myth" for some people. His white beard may indicate that he is one of the wise and reasonable people who protest all kinds of unjust situations for the sake of his people. Guerin et al. state that the Jungian concept as cited in "the wise old man provides spiritual guidance and moral wisdom for the young hero" (Guerin et al., 1986:190).

In many myth motives, the hero is usually kept in prison. In this text, Ahmet is imprisoned in Ishac Pasha Palace for not revealing the hidden place to the villagers. Later, Musa Bey and Ahmet are put in the same prison. Ahmet never reveals the whereabouts of the white horse to the Sultan, therefore he prefers to be in prison and suffers from the belief that a gift horse can not be taken back to its previous place.

The most striking myth motif used in this text is the theme of love at first sight. This theme is commonly used in many myth criticisms. Gülbahar, the daughter of Mahmut Khan falls in love with Ahmet, the new owner of the white horse. Their love story is very tragic. Guerin et al., state that "The phenomenon of love, especially love at first sight may be explained at least in part by Jung's theory of the anima: we tend to be attracted to members of the opposite sex who mirror the characteristics of our own inner selves" (Guerin et al., 1986:181).

Another motif that can be found in myths is to drive the main character to the most complex and difficult tasks. This is common in Anatolian myths. In this text, the difficult task is given to Ahmet, the main character. He is sent to the peak of Mount Ararat to build a fire there. If he accomplishes this task given by the Sultan, he will be able to marry his daughter. It is known by people that nobody has climbed to the peak of that mountain in winter. To go there and come back would be possible only with the help of the mountain. Finally, Ahmet is safely back (Kemal, 1997:108). People believe, Ahmet would be protected by Mount Ararat because he is originally from Ağrı. Moreover, it was Hüsso, the ironworker, who had given Ahmet a blessing to sanctify him. Mount Ararat would never be the cause of his death.

Different images used in this text can be some examples of archetypes. For example, the lake near the peak of Mount Ararat creates the mystery about how Ahmet can drown in that lake. The archetypal meaning of the water is the purification that might express fertility and growth. According to Carl Jung, water is the most common symbol for the unconscious. Among colors, "white" and "blue" are denoted for animals such as the horse and small birds bathing in "Küp Lake". The color "blue" expresses spiritual purity and security whereas "white" signifies purity, death, the supernatural, innocence, etc.

For the concept of "The Earth Mother", Guerin et al., state that "the positive aspects of the Earth Mother associated with the life principle, birth, warmth, nourishment, protection, fertility, growth, abundance" (Guerin et al., 1986:160). Sun, fire, sky, and stars are repeated images in this text. For Jung, they denote a creative and endless energy, the law in nature serving for symbols of the unconscious. The symbol for the setting sun is death as happened to Ahmet at the end of the story (Kemal, 1997:102).

### **3. Mythical Motifs in *Yer Demir Gök Bakır***

The mythical elements in this novel are various. It is interesting to observe how people need a mythos like "bread and butter", whenever they are exposed to difficult life conditions, and unable to pay their debt back due to great poverty. At that time such "mythos" or "tales" act as a new hope, a new light, a new topic for their future life. From that point of view, the story is very rich with different mythical elements in two groups, one being supernatural beings and the other supra-human beings, are as follows:

#### **a- Mythical elements of super natural beings:**

- The blind man called "Abdal" is able to see by the help of a beautiful crane. When he finds the crane by feeling with his feet on his road, he brings it home and takes care of it. Later, a heavy cluster of light comes to the man's face. When he opens his eyes, he realizes that he is not blind any more, but the crane flies away without allowing him to touch it (Kemal, 1976:118-119).

-The legend of Fair Girl "Sarı Kız" is mentioned. The marriage of Sarı Kız and Taşbaş is given in

legendary form. The great Taşbaş rides on deer to go and see Sarı Kız with the trees, rocks, rivers, springwaters, snakes and other creatures of Toros Mountain behind him (Kemal, 1976: 209-210).

- One day Taşbaş desires to eat honey. When he opens his eyes, he sees that a full bucket of honey is available in front of him, but he does not even taste it, saying that he couldn't taste it because the villagers are in hunger. He only eats one date every day while coming from Baghdad. He is the hero that was able to climb to the peak of Bingöl Mountain. He finds the horse of Koroğlu there and drinks the water from the life spring among various springwater. He is Taşbaş who makes the flowers bloom and who sparks the light from the ground whenever he steps on it. He also had an invitation to settle down in a palace built on the top of Tekeç mountain from the fairies (Kemal, 1976: 274).

-Taşbaş goes to the Kaaba at Mecca in one night, visits the tomb of Muhammed and comes back early the next morning and the light above his house roof becomes green and turns around the house like dervishes saying "Allah, Allah". Taşbaş hears the noise outside his house and comes out seeing a huge plain tree on the top of his house (Kemal, 1976: 273).

-The Corporal Cumali tells everyone that while they were taking Taşbaş to the headquarters, he hears some voice saying "Ali, Ali" and finds himself surrounded in light. At that time the light explodes and moves to the mountain, and Taşbaş Memet disappears (Kemal, 1976: 351).

-Hasan daydreams the holy walnut tree with the light sliding down to the top of the house of Taşbaş (Kemal, 1976: 356).

#### **b - Mythical elements of supra-human beings:**

- Hasan and Ummahan go to the forest to collect some wood and Hasan builds a fire. Hasan dreams a lot by looking at the different shapes of flames as if he is watching a horror film (Kemal, 1976: 22).

-All the children go to the forest and they see that Hasan tries to remove the heavy stone and sees different objects which no one can see except Hasan, who says that there is an entrance to a golden bazaar under the stone. This case creates mystery among the children and women in the village (Kemal, 1976: 141-144).

-The most influential character of this story is Taşbaş. Whatever he says comes true, therefore people in the village put his place in a different category among the ancient mystical names. The more he talks, the closer he approaches to the stage of god (Kemal, 1976:151-152).

-Gossip starts about Taşbaş in the village. The first one is that, a man called "Ahmet" comes to the village and informs the villages that the lovers (Hüsne and Recep) are frozen. When he comes to the house of Taşbaş after giving the news, he bows and kisses the ground three times. He also utters sentences about Taşbaş that can be considered holy (Kemal, 1976:167).

-The discussions on how Taşbaş became a devoted person began. How was such a distinguished gift given to his ancestors by God? How was the name of "taşbaş" given to him by the kingdom of stone (Kemal, 1976: 179-180).

-The dream of Memidik, which is the last mythical motif, takes up many pages. The dream starts with the exploding of clusters of lights and rocks and a sharp humming from the ground. Later, Memidik dreams of a shadow among the seven clusters of light. The shadow moves to Tekeç Mountain accompanied by clusters of green light. Then the shadow becomes clear and Memidik realizes that it is the face of great Taşbaş in green (Kemal, 1976: 230- 232).

-A white bird stands in front of Taşbaş's house without moving for three days. The bird is as big as an eagle that has never been seen before in Çukurove and in Toros (Kemal, 1976: 257).

-Different stories are given about forty virgins who come to the front of Taşbaş's house, build a fire and dance at the edge of the holy fire like the fresh flowers of almonds. Another story is about the strong desire of Taşbaş to go to heaven, where honey, milk and butter are running in the rivers and the trees are full of fruit in a unique season which is spring (Kemal, 1976: 272).

-Taşbaş himself hides in a barn opposite his house at midnight and starts waiting for the great light with a holy walnut tree to appear on the top of house. The first two days he only hears a low hissing. On the third day, in a cold night, he notices the approaching cluster of light with the same hissing sound after praying toward the direction of Mecca. The light comes from a holy walnut tree which turns around his house and then goes back immediately. And he realizes the fact that he is one of the devoted people in the universe (Kemal, 1976: 315 -328).

-Taşbaş is a definite example of a devoted person, given by God, and therefore a huge number of chronically-ill people come to visit him hoping to be cured by his healing hands (Kemal, 1976: 275 -280).

-The legend of Yağmur Dede who sends the rain to the village is mentioned. He has all the supernatural

power in the Universe. He makes the snow, sends storms, stops the rain and supplies fertility for the ground (Kemal, 1976: 281).

-Different stories on Taşbaş's curing the patients are stated. One of the patients who is a virgin and has been unable to walk for seven years, starts walking by touching his hands and praying at the top of Tekeç Mountain for three days (Kemal, 1976: 309).

-Another patient is a young man who is a shepherd at the age of 25. One night, the wolves attack his sheep, and then a struggle starts between the shepherd and the wolves that last until the next morning. After the fight with wolves, the shepherd is unconscious because of his continuous effort to save the sheep. After that night, he loses his ability to talk and becomes mute. And Taşbaş spits into the shepherd's mouth and he starts talking (Kemal, 1976: 310).

-Another patient called Kemal suffers from malaria every year. Therefore, he can't pick cotton in Çukurova with his villagers. And Taşbaş puts some oil on a piece of cotton and burns it in his nose. After that, Kemal never suffers from the malaria again (Kemal, 1976: 310).

-The cruel Mustafa is seventy years old and has been blind since he was thirty-seven years old. Taşbaş mixes the willow leaves with the wings of a bat, prays over him, and then burns the leaves and the wings. When the smoke enters Mustafa's eyes, his eyes become widely open (Kemal, 1976: 310).

-The name of Taşbaş is never pronounced without uttering the holy title before his name. This indicates that he has got the highest religious status (Kemal, 1976: 334).

### **c- The mixed elements of supra-human beings and supernatural beings used together:**

-The conversation between the fairy girl and the great Halil follows the typical form of a legend. Although he stole something, he is not punished by the fairy girl, because he is young and brave. Here the power of light emanating from the fairy girl transports him to the center of a village before he can open his eyes (Kemal, 1976:18).

-The ancestor of Taşbaş, called Lokman Taşbaş collects different types of plants from Toros and from Erciyas to prepare a medicine to cure sick people, and to end poverty and death. He succeeds in finding the medicine that prevents death but while he is about to declare to people the name of the plant, a white wing takes the notebook and throws it into the Ceyhan river (Kemal, 1976: 181- 185).

#### **4. Some Examples of Archetypes in *Yer Demir Gök Bakır***

After having mentioned these mythical elements in *Yer Demir Gök Bakır*, there are other images and expressions that need to be stated here.

An expression that is commonly used, "Muhammed, the beautiful name" is a cliché used in other legends such as *Dede Korkut Destanları*. It is a lively expression of daily language still used in many parts of Anatolia.

Different colors are attributed to different objects in nature in both texts. "Green","white" and "yellow" are the commonest ones used in this text. According to Carl Jung, "green connotes growth, sensation, hope, fertility, and in negative contexts may be associated with death and decay" (Guerin et al.,1986: 58).

In every culture the color "white" is used positively to mean light, purity, cleanness and innocence and negatively to refer to death and terror. The color "yellow" is used for the name of the fairy girl. It may connote virginity and the mysteriousness of plants.

Among numbers, "three" and "seven" are commonly used. In traditional Turkish folk tales "forty" also has remarkable importance. In this novel, the number forty is attributed to the fairy girls. Guerin et al. state that "the number three is light, spiritual awareness and unity" (Guerin et al. 1986: 163). Moreover, the concept of "tree" is frequently used in the form of walnut. As can be seen in the following quotation, Cirlot gives detailed information about the nature of "tree" referring to immortality.

In its most general sense, the symbolism of the tree denotes the life of the cosmos: its consistence, growth, proliferation, generative and regenerative processes. It stands for inexhaustable life, and is therefore equivalent to a symbol of immortality" (Guerin et al.,1986: 165).

In this novel, the dream of Hasan reflects that "Taşbaş", the main character of this novel, is not dead. Hasan visualizes the holy walnut tree with the green light moving round Taşbaş's house by viewing the flames on the last page. The reader assumes that "Taşbaş" achieves a kind of immortality in a mysterious way in nature. There are other common archetypical images that stand for different representations. Among those are the "matches" and "flames of fire". The "fire" might be interpreted as the source of energy, and the strongest and continuous power of nature without which no life could be possible. Among animals, snakes, birds, horse,

dog, and deer are commonly mentioned. Some examples of birds are eagles and cranes. Birds usually denote mystery, sensuality and freedom, therefore a reader is likely to encounter them in any kind of literary text.

### 5. Conclusion

After having examined the mythical motifs in *Ağrı Dağı Efsanesi*, based on the story of the released white horse, such as the anger of Mount Ararat and the love between the ordinary villager and the beautiful daughter of the Sultan, the following can be said:

It is not surprising to see the same elements in another novel by Yaşar Kemal, *Yer Demir Gök Bakır*, which is based on the story of villagers living in Çukurova. It deals with their struggle with poverty, with the difficult conditions of winter and the leaders of the village. One is the local landowner and the other is a supporter of the head man in the village.

Although the two stories differ from each other, the mythical motifs used in the stories correspond to each other. Mount Ararat has been replaced with Toros Mountain. The climatic conditions show similarities such as snow, cold and sharp blowing wind. The season of winter is the common theme in both stories. People are deprived by the ruling bodies. They are poor but very honest and are strictly tied to their traditional norms. For them, the meaning of life is to obey the traditional customs drawn by elder generations and sceptically tend to produce and believe different legends, tales and stories creating supernatural creatures in the form of both human and non-human beings.

All the characters in both texts are completely different but the actions that they are involved in resemble each other, especially those of the main characters. The bad event is used in both texts with a slight difference. In *Ağrı Dağı Efsanesi* the villain is the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire who doesn't obey the traditional norms and behaves badly to the villagers of Ağrı. In *Yer Demir Gök Bakır*, it is the local big landowner (agha) who exploits the villagers of Yalak in Çukurova. The heroes succeed at the most difficult tasks they are given and are offered a prize. They achieve the holy immortality of nature at the end of both stories.

The meaning of myth, given by Otto Rank as "[...] in some sense myths are the dream-thinking of people" was the oldest idea about myths (Kirk, 1970:273). On the other hand, Abraham stated that myth is "a fragment preserved from the infantile psychic life of the race, and the dreams are the myths of the individual (Kirk, 1970: 273). Furthermore, Kirk emphasizes that a myth is "a dream of the masses of the people" (Kirk, 1970:273). It is clear that there is no agreed definition of myth since myths vary from the ancient time to the present based on their belief and culture.

On the other hand, the studies done by Freud and Jung show that there is a close relationship between dreams and the products of myths such as fairy-tales, legends, jokes and folklore. Therefore a dream can be considered as the myth of an individual. According to Kirk "Myths are at the very least tales that have been passed down from generation to generation, that have become traditional" (Kirk, 1970: 282).

Human beings lead a life for generations based on the ability of myths to transmit thinking, thoughts and cultural norms within their traditional frames which is a product of emotional needs and desires about the supernaturals in the universe. Telling stories is a common activity in evening family gatherings in most villages of Anatolia.

It can be said that life without any myths, legends or tales would not be possible for human beings. Leitch states that "[w]ithout myth man had become abstract-homeless, godless, frantic". (Leitch, 1988: 116) If there is no myth in a culture, it becomes a lost culture. From this point of view, Yaşar Kemal's stories about human beings' dreams, desires and hopes are good examples for mythical studies in that they create different mythos and depend on them to satisfy their "ego" viewed from different points of view in that speech community. Myths are the real evidence of cultural acting as a bridge between the old and the new generations.

It has been observed that the samples given for supra-human beings in *Yer Demir Gök Bakır* are more common than the samples of supernatural beings. The number of samples for supra-human beings is 16 whereas the number of samples for supernatural beings is only 6. The mixed samples that are used together are very rare. As pointed out by Kırtunç, the reason might be because of the writer's "indirect appearance of the common unconscious which is seen in dreams, in extraordinary states of mind and in the fantasies we create" (Kırtunç, 1994:17).

When examples of archetypes are applied to both text of Yaşar Kemal, it can be stated that these symbols (in both texts) reflect his personal and collective unconscious as put forward by Jung. Examples such as beliefs, dreams, feelings, and fantasies are the products of the collective unconscious of the writer, some of which are inherited from ancient people.

To conclude, the richness of the writer's "inner world" through his personality and experience is clearly

perceived by the readers.

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