

Article

The Transformation of Islamic Discourse in Turkish Novels: Social Change, Identity, and Narrative Aesthetics

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Abstract

Through the process of modernization, Turkish literature transcends aesthetics to reflect sociological and cultural changes. The tensions between the individual and society, tradition and modernity, and religion that emerged with Westernization are particularly reflected in the novel. Religious discourse takes different forms at each historical threshold during the modernization process. During the Tanzimat, Servet-i Fünûn, Milli Edebiyat and Socialist Realist periods, it served as a defensive or critical reference point in the face of debates on modernization and Westernization. With the secular policies of the Republic, its public function transformed, evolving into an arena for cultural and moral debate, and it increased its visibility within the multiparty political structure after 1950. From the 1980s onwards, Islamic discourse became an artistic and ideological force in both the social and literary spheres. This article examines the stages of Islamic discourse in Turkish novels within a historical framework, arguing that religious representations are not merely elements reflecting social change, but also play an active role in the reconstruction of identity formation and narrative aesthetics. The study analyzes the functions of religious elements using a text-centered approach. The findings show that religion is not merely a theme in literary texts, but a living element that transforms alongside society, influences identity formation, and shapes narrative aesthetics.

Keywords: modern Turkish literature; social change; identity; aesthetics; the novel genre; religious discourse; Islamic guidance novels

1. Introduction

The emergence of the Turkish novel did not occur simultaneously and abruptly with the proclamation of the Tanzimat Edict (1839). Within the multi-religious and multi-ethnic structure of the Ottoman Empire, the novel genre developed gradually through different alphabetic and linguistic traditions. The Story of Akabi (1851), written in Armenian script, and Tamaşa-yi Dünyâ ve Cefakar u Cefakeş (The Spectacle of the World and the Suffering and the Suffering One 1872), published in Greek script, are among the early examples of this pluralistic beginning. The serialization of the first novel written in Ottoman Turkish, Taaşuk-ı Talat ve Fitnat (The Love of Talat and Fitnat), in 1873, represents another stage in this process.

This study focuses on the modern Turkish novel tradition that took shape on the new social and intellectual groundwork laid by the modernization process that gained momentum in Ottoman society with the Tanzimat Edict. The press culture that developed with the Tanzimat, the formation of a new bureaucratic class, debates on Westernization, and the visibility of religious authority in the public sphere are the fundamental dynamics



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that determined the birth of the novel genre (Dino 2008). The term “Turkish novel” refers to modern fictional narratives written in Turkish during the period spanning from the post-Tanzimat Ottoman Empire to the Republic and the 2000s. This study aims to examine the literary representations of religious discourse within this historical continuity, focusing on both continuity and paradigmatic shifts. This approach interacts with fundamental studies addressing the formation and development of the modern Turkish novel (Moran 2018; Esen 2021; Parla 2022).

Early Turkish novels are based on a unique narrative logic. At first glance, these texts appear contradictory, with a structure that sometimes gives the impression of inconsistency in terms of plot and characterization. However, considering that the dominant narrative form is based on a priori, idealistic judgments that speak to society, and that elements such as plot and character construction are secondary in importance, it is clear that this style of novel writing has internal consistency and its own aesthetic rationale. According to Jale Parla, the distinction between approaches based on the unquestionable nature of the Quran, the supremacy of Aristotelian deductive logic, a worldview where good and evil are clearly separated, abstract idealism stemming from a mystical tradition, and methods of acquiring knowledge based on Sharia and fiqh-based law and kalam, also determines the ways in which novels establish the relationship between life and text (Parla 2022, pp. 14–15). Therefore, the narrative logic of the first Turkish novels is a reflection of the method of establishing the connection between text and life, beyond a formal choice. From the Ottoman Empire to the Republic, from single-party rule to a multi-party political system, the multi-layered historical process spanning different stages of modernization to post-1980 identity policies has produced a broad intellectual ground where the phenomenon of religion has been redefined on both individual and collective levels, enabling the representation of religious discourse in literary texts in different forms within aesthetic, ideological, and cultural contexts.

The study examines the literary representation of religion along this historical trajectory, focusing on period-specific changes: the relationship between religion and individual values in the Tanzimat and Servet-i Fünûn periods, the position of religion within the social structure in Republican-era novels, its connection to class analysis in socialist realist novels, its reconstruction around the ideal of individual and social salvation in post-1960 Islamic novels, and how religious discourse was established and interpreted based on postmodern narrative strategies in the 1990s. Therefore, religion is a multidimensional cultural discourse that intersects with identity construction, ideological orientation, and aesthetic preferences beyond a belief system.

Examples have been selected from novels representing different periods and addressing religious themes both in terms of content and structure. This selection reveals how these texts construct religious motifs and which narrative techniques they employ in the production of individual and cultural meaning, while also allowing for an assessment of the relationship these novels establish with the literary, social, and cultural context of their respective periods.

The article examines the transformation of religious discourse in Turkish novels through historical developments and social changes, approaching the novel both as a genre that deals with religious themes and as a dynamic field where religious thought is shaped and questioned.

2. Religion and Belief in Turkish Novels from the Tanzimat to Socialist Realism

The emergence of the Turkish novel became apparent in the 1870s, within the cultural modernization process that gained momentum following the Tanzimat reforms. From

this period until the 1970s, the novel underwent significant transformations in terms of its aesthetic, ideological, and social functions. The general outlook of literature is based on a positivist epistemology that excludes metaphysics, imagination, and the individual's subconscious, prioritizing observation and social realism. The novel focuses more on the transformation processes of society, the pains of modernization, and the new values shaped by Western influence than on the inner conflicts of the individual (Akçam 2006, p. 124). This situation also brings with it limitations on the narration of religious life in literary texts. Indeed, during this period, "we cannot see the manifestations of religious life sufficiently and adequately" (Timur 2006, p. 50). To elaborate on this statement, religion is seen not as an individual belief system but mostly as part of or opposed to Westernization-based social problems.

Ahmet Midhat (1844–1912) and Mizancı Murat (1854–1917) are names that represent two different orientations of religious discourse in Tanzimat novels. Ahmet Midhat "emerges as a storyteller in the Turkish novel of the Tanzimat period, as well as a defender of Islam" (Karaca 2013, p. 277). Ahmet Midhat presents the novel as "a school for the people" and uses literature as a pedagogical tool. Evaluations of his understanding of the novel emphasize that the author's didactic approach is based on a religious-moral framework (Tanpınar 1997; M. Kaplan 1997). This approach is evident in *Felatun Bey ile Rakım Efendi* (Felatun Bey and Rakım Efendi 1875). In the novel, Rakım Efendi's commitment to moral and religious values is presented as an ideal type in contrast to Felatun Bey's superficial Westernization (Ahmet Midhat 2019). In the words of Ahmet Midhat, "The education and schooling Rakım Efendi received could not be bestowed upon just any well-to-do man's son. Thanks to his own desire and his nanny's encouragement, he mastered Arabic grammar and also studied the *Risale-i Erbaa* with its accompanying commentaries. He learned logic very thoroughly, right up to the end of his studies. He gained considerable knowledge of hadith and tafsir. He also reviewed fiqh. Not only did he learn Persian works such as *Gulistan*, *Baharistan*, *Bostan*, and *Pend-i Attar*, along with *Hafiz* and *Saib*, but he also memorized selected passages" (Ahmet Midhat 2019, p. 15). Rakım Efendi's meticulous education and comprehensive academic background enable him to stand out as a character committed to moral and religious values. His profound knowledge of Arabic, Persian, logic, hadith, tafsir, and fiqh does not remain confined to an individual learning process but shapes him into an ideal figure suited to the cultural and religious fabric of society. The narrator's frequent interventions to convey these details to the reader and make moral inferences show that religion in the novel is not limited to individual belief but is treated as a fundamental element of social order. Indeed, Ahmet Midhat's aim is to develop an intellectual position that can defend the Ottoman Empire's own values against the West's one-sided judgments of the Islamic world. In contrast, in Mizancı Murat's novel *Turfanda mı Yoksa Turfa mı?* (Is Murat a Turfanda or a Turfa? 1892), religion is discussed more in the context of modernization ideology and state–society relations. The work expresses a search for synthesis between Islamic values and Western institutions through the character of Mansur Bey. Throughout various sections of the novel, religion is depicted as the legitimate basis for social reform and moral restructuring. Through the character of Mansur, the author addresses both the idea of Islamic unity and the problem of illiteracy in the Islamic world. According to the author, Islamic unity can only be achieved through a strong and high-quality education system. For this reason, even the education of Muslim children in schools established by Jesuit priests is considered an acceptable option in line with educational goals (Mizancı Murat 2019, p. 139). In this respect, the text reflects the post-Tanzimat Ottoman intellectual's search for a religion-centered solution to the problem of modernization.

One of the significant developments that fueled religious debates during the Tanzimat period was the Orientalist discourse coming from the West. In a lecture given at the Sorbonne University in 1883, French historian Ernest Renan (1823–1892) argued that Islam was an obstacle to science, culture, education, philosophy, and civilization in general (Renan 1946, p. 184). Renan's claims resonated strongly among Ottoman intellectuals. Namık Kemal (1840–1888) and Ahmet Midhat, two prominent figures of the period, drew attention with their writings defending Islam against these claims. Namık Kemal, in *Renan Müdâfaanâmesi* (Renan's Defense 1889), demonstrates that Islam does not conflict with science and reason, but rather is compatible with these values. He argues that Islam has historically contributed to scientific progress and asserts that there is no necessary conflict between reason and revelation. According to the author, Islamic civilization, especially during the classical period, encouraged rational sciences and nurtured scientific thought (Namık Kemal 2014). A similar line of defense is seen in Ahmet Midhat's work *Nizâ-ı İlm ü Din* (The Conflict Between Science and Religion 1896). Ahmet Midhat argues here that religion and science are not fundamentally in conflict and that, when correctly interpreted, Islam is based on a rational foundation. The work conducts a systematic polemic against positivist and materialist tendencies in Western thought. "Do not think that we, like Catholic priests, are actually enemies of science and knowledge! God forbid! As these discussions progress, more strange and bizarre things will be seen; then ideas and tendencies will be understood much more clearly, and, God willing, it will be seen how Islamic wisdom has solved the definitive truth that many wisdoms have failed to solve for two thousand years" (Ahmet Midhat 2022, p. 88).

Within the framework of the transformation that literature underwent after the Tanzimat, the Servet-i Fünûn group, which was influential between 1896 and 1901, established a decisive threshold in Turkish literature, particularly with the innovations it achieved in the novel genre (Enginün 2014, p. 165). Servet-i Fünûn novelists developed a narrative approach that focused on the inner world of the individual, differing from the didactic and socially oriented line of Tanzimat novels. Operating in the politically oppressive environment of the reign of Abdülhamid II (1876–1909), this generation systematically adopted Western aesthetics in Ottoman-Turkish literature. The aesthetic understanding that developed, particularly under the influence of French symbolism and Parnassianism, emphasized individual sensitivity, melancholy, and aesthetic autonomy. Unlike the Tanzimat, religion ceased to be an explicitly visible theme in Servet-i Fünûn novels.

It focuses on the individual's inner world, emotional breakdowns, and aesthetic perception. During this period, influenced by Western literary movements such as realism and naturalism, more refined narratives develop regarding the psychological analysis and social position of the individual, but this orientation greatly limits the influence of religious themes in the structure of the novel. The novel *Aşk-ı Memnu* (Forbidden Love 1901) by Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil (1865–1945), one of the leading novelists of the period, deals with forbidden love. The moral conflicts experienced by the characters in the novel are often based on worldly values. Faith-based analysis is almost non-existent. It deals with individual desire, social status, and modern ideals of life. The novel emphasizes psychological analysis, and religious references are not a mechanism for producing decisive meaning. For example, Bihter's internal conflict in the face of forbidden love in the novel does not open up a theological debate on the axis of sin and virtue. The tragedy is constructed through the tension between her individual desires as a young and passionate woman and the rigid norms of the bourgeois family structure she is part of, and the final resolution is linked not to the idea of divine justice, but to the inevitable consequences of social sanctions and psychological destruction (Uşaklıgil 2016, pp. 168–73).

Another novelist, Mehmet Rauf (1875–1931), in his novel *Eylül* (September 1901), also presents the forbidden love between Suat and Necip in a manner that clearly diverges from the didactic and religion-centered moral understanding of the Tanzimat novel. The relationship is not grounded in the category of sin committed against a divine law. It is interpreted through the tension between the individual's inner torment, guilt, and passion. Morality is not an external norm in the face of love, but rather a form of internal reckoning that appears in the characters' consciousness. "She now understood that it was absolutely necessary to bury that love, that it was imperative to sacrifice those dreams without a second thought. This ill-fated love, whose happiness existed only in dreams, now saw nothing but torment and misfortune. For the thousandth time, he repeated that this love was an unbearable disaster, a mere terrible punishment; that he could see nothing from it but torment and anguish; that even in his happiest moments, it had burned him with a thousand fires, destroyed his peace, killed him. First, they burned with remorse and pangs of conscience for no reason, then came separation and jealousy, followed by insults and betrayal. And even as he thought this way: . . ." (Mehmet Rauf 2022, p. 408). Suat's mental breakdown here cannot be explained by religious references. It is shaped around repressed desire, loneliness, and the need to be understood. Necip's hesitations are also related to worldly values such as friendship, loyalty, and self-respect rather than metaphysical fear. Thus, rather than dramatizing forbidden love through the concept of "sin," the novel focuses on the fragmented inner world of the modern individual. Consequently, morality in the *Servet-i Fünûn* novel is increasingly transferred to a secular ground. Religious discourse loses its role as the founding principle of the narrative. It is replaced by psychological depth, individual sensitivity, and aesthetic concern. Morality ceases to be a sphere of social-religious sanction and becomes a subjective field of experience that determines the individual's inner collapse and tragedy. This transformation follows a line consistent with the modern character understanding of the *Servet-i Fünûn* aesthetic, which prioritizes individual consciousness and emotional intensity over social norms.

This situation is not limited to individual author preferences. It is also closely related to the intellectual atmosphere of the period. With the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Monarchy in 1908, positivist systems of thought gradually gained strength among the Ottoman intelligentsia. In the new intellectual climate, religion began to be seen as an obstacle to individual and social progress. Among the intellectuals, those who embraced Western-style modernization in particular began to question religious structures and traditional institutions. The magazine *İctihad* (Jurisprudence 1904–1932), founded by Abdullah Cevdet (1869–1932), was not only a publication but also an intellectual platform that pioneered radical modernization in Ottoman-Turkish thought. Writers gathered around the journal, such as Kılıçzade Hakkı (1872–1960) and Celal Nuri İleri (1882–1936), put forward views on issues such as the secularization of education, the recognition of women's rights, the modernization of the family institution, and the redefinition of religion's place in social life through their writings based on positivist philosophy. The common thread in these writings is the positioning of religion as a traditional obstacle to progress and its replacement with scientific thought, individualism, and rational interpretations. In his writings, Abdullah Cevdet bases social progress on the concepts of "science and technology" and argues that the influence of religion in the public sphere should be limited. "The beliefs that are influential and dominant in a nation's religion, aspirations, and practices are its creeds. It is evident how the creeds that reign in our souls and consciences as Muslims have reduced us to what levels and perceptions" (Abdullah Cevdet 1926, p. 3863). Here, he interprets Islam in the context of daily life habits and the social, economic, and political collapse of the Ottoman Empire at that time. Celal Nuri İleri, on the other hand, argues that education should be secularized, women's rights expanded, and the family structure

modernized. According to him, religion is not a dogmatic obstacle to progress, but a historical institution that needs to be reinterpreted. For social transformation to occur sooner, the ulema must think freely, derive the necessary rulings from appropriate sources, and not oppose new ideas. “The greatest enemies of Islam are not the righteous, but the narrow-minded who insist on preserving harmful traditions” (İleri 1913, pp. 1427–30). This approach, unlike the classical Tanzimat defense of religion, proposes that the social position of religion be redefined using rational criteria. This intellectual atmosphere is also reflected in literature. The novel transforms into a narrative form that conveys the mental and moral disintegration of the modern individual through psychological and social dynamics rather than through faith-centered interpretation. Indeed, Murat Belge also relates this transformation to the secularization trend of Ottoman-Turkish modernization (Belge 2005, p. 132); however, this trend can be traced not only through theoretical interpretations but also through the primary intellectual texts and novels of the period.

The Milli Edebiyat movement that developed after 1911 moved away from the individualism of Servet-i Fünûn, adhering to the principles of linguistic simplification and a focus on social reality. The Milli Edebiyat novel shifted its focus from the narrow world of the elite circles centered in Istanbul to Anatolia, the daily life of the people, and the search for national identity. By developing an understanding that emphasized historical consciousness, cultural roots, and a sense of collective belonging, it made the novel one of the carriers of the nation-building process. With the proclamation of the Republic (1923), literature ensured the establishment of the principle of secularism in the cultural sphere. The new regime’s secularization program, based on the separation of religion and state affairs, found its counterpart in cultural production as well as in the fields of law and education. The novel creates a modern citizen type shaped on the basis of reason, science, and public responsibility, reducing the dominance of traditional religious references. Thus, literature assumes a supporting role in the construction of the secular public sphere. Assessing this process within its historical context, Niyazi Berkes emphasizes in his work *Modernization in Turkey* that secularism should not be understood merely as an institutional arrangement, but rather as a comprehensive modernization project aimed at transforming the social mindset (Berkes 1973, pp. 462–63). The secular sensibility of early Republican literature can be read as one of the reflections of this transformation of mentality in the cultural sphere. Particularly during the single-party regime (1923–1950), the visibility of religion in the public sphere was restricted. “This situation was directly reflected in literature. The revolutionary literature that took shape in the early years of the Republic tended to exclude religious elements from literary representation. Instead, the aim was to promote works that encouraged a revolutionary, rational, progressive, and positivist worldview” (Çıkla 2007, p. 53). According to Orhan Okay, during this period, writers were directed to persuade the public in line with the revolutions and to eliminate motifs such as the outdated Ottoman mentality, superstitions, and false beliefs (Okay 1998, p. 2896). For example, in Reşat Nuri Güntekin’s (1889–1956) novel *Yeşil Gece* (Green Night 1928), religious characters are mostly portrayed as ignorant and opportunistic. The plot centers on the struggle of Şahin Efendi, an idealistic teacher assigned to the town of Sariova, against conservative circles fueled by vested interests. Şahin, who aims to contribute to society in every way and transform his environment, is constantly hindered by people who fail to understand his intentions and resist change. Despite this, he does not lose faith and continues to work with determination, undeterred by the pressure and weariness he encounters (Güntekin 2017). Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu’s (1889–1974) novel *Yaban* (Wild 1932) narrates rural reality through the observations of Ahmet Celâl, an enlightened former soldier. The villagers calling him “yaban” (wild) clearly illustrates the cultural distance between the intellectual and the people. Ahmet Celâl’s anger and disappointment at the diseases in the village, the

children's lack of education, the rote repetition of religious knowledge, and the indifference to the National Struggle is not an accusation, but an internal questioning of the failure of the ideal of modernization to find a response in the countryside: "The people of Anatolia had a spirit, and you couldn't penetrate it. It had a mind; you failed to enlighten it. It had a body; you failed to nourish it . . . It grew like a weed between the hard soil and the dry sky. Now you have come here with your sickle to harvest! What did you sow that you will reap?" (Karaosmanoğlu 2015, p. 14). The text removes Okay's idea of "recreating society" from being a one-sided directive discourse and expresses that the disconnect between the intellectuals and the people also contributed to the failure of the transformation. Therefore, while the pedagogical goal of revolutionary ideology is clear in both novels, *Yaban* in particular problematizes the limits of the modernization ideal in the field with a critical internal perspective.

This chronological flow clearly shows how the narrative function of religion evolved in the process stretching from *Servet-i Fünûn* to the first examples of novels in the Republic, via the Second Constitutional Era and *Milli Edebiyat*. Religion ceases to be the central determinant; themes such as individual conscience, the tension of modernization, social reform, and intellectual isolation come to the fore. Novels not only convey the state's modernization projects but also transform into a comprehensive narrative form that documents the moral and intellectual disintegration of the modern individual.

With the 1940s, the political and socio-economic transformations experienced in Turkey led to a distinct paradigm shift in the literary field, with a class-centered perspective becoming increasingly dominant. During this period, socialist realism ceased to be an aesthetic orientation and acquired the nature of an explicit intellectual configuration. Writers who chose the village as their setting approached rural life in the context of production relations and power structures rather than presenting it within a framework of folkloric romanticism (Oktay 2003; R. Kaplan 1988). In this vein, village literature produced a systematic critique of feudal remnants, forms of domination based on land ownership, and lack of education, and its effects lasted until the 1980s. These writers draw heavily on their own environments and autobiographical stories. Writers such as Yaşar Kemal (1923–2015), Fakir Baykurt (1929–1999), and Talip Apaydın (1925–2009) are writers who grew up in villages. The themes explored include religion, superstitions, traditions, the oppression of the landlords, land disputes, banditry, the cheapening of labor, poverty, and the resulting migration to the city, among other topics. Village literature criticizes feudal remnants and land-based domination, addressing religion not as a direct belief system but often in terms of its function within the social structure. As Moran also states, religion is questioned in the context of fatalism, tradition, authority, and the production of legitimacy (Moran 2016, p. 16). For example, in Fakir Baykurt's (1929–1999) novel *Yılanların Öcü* (The Revenge of the Snakes 1959), the fundamental conflict reveals the power relations within the village through the issue of building a house in front of Kara Bayram's house. Religion is not directly a theological topic of discussion here, but some characters in the village accept injustices through the discourse of "gratitude" and "fate." Baykurt presents the imam character and religious language in particular as a means of passivization intertwined with the feudal order (Baykurt 1985). Thus, in village novels, religion is constructed not so much as a transcendent realm of truth but as an institution that performs specific functions within the network of social relations. Rather than faith itself, the novel questions how faith is interpreted under certain conditions and how it is linked to local power mechanisms. This questioning is important in that it shows that the village novel has developed a critical realism that analyzes religion through its place in the socio-economic structure rather than developing an anti-religious discourse.

3. Faith, Identity, and Hidayet Romanları (Guidance Novels) in Turkish Literature from 1950 to 1980

Until the 1950s, Islamic discourse was relegated to the background due to political conditions. However, with the transition to a multi-party system and the partial liberalization of the intellectual environment, it began to emerge in literary and cultural spheres. With the Democratic Party in power, the public's interest in religious values found a political counterpart, and this development also influenced the direction of literature. Religious themes, which attracted the interest of broad segments of the public, became increasingly visible in popular literature. The guidance novel, which centered on the shift from a secular or faithless lifestyle to Islamic values and was constructed around a story of transformation, created both an educational and a guiding effect on the reader by relating the search for individual identity in a social and cultural sense.

According to Çayır, guidance novels are message-laden narratives that present Islam as the path to salvation against the moral decay brought about by the modern age. The plot structure is largely based on the contrast between characters representing Islamic values and Westernized-modern characters. This common final plot, in which characters experiencing unhappiness in modern life find guidance through Islamic figures, is the fundamental reason why these narratives are called guidance novels. "The structure of guidance novels is based on two competing value systems: Islamic and non-Islamic. Non-Islamic value systems are presented as Kemalist-secular, Western, and Christian worldviews. However, the Kemalist modernizing worldview, which also brings Westernization, is the main focus of the struggle in the novels" (Çayır 2008, p. 123). The plot of the guidance novel generally progresses along the axis of crisis-search-guidance-transformation. The protagonist is often confronted with the void of meaning, moral decay, or identity fragmentation created by modern life. This crisis leads to contact with Islamic values through a guiding figure (an imam, a devout friend, a Sufi personality, etc.) and the development of a new ethical orientation. This individual transformation also becomes a cultural critique directed at modernization.

Hekimoğlu İsmail (1942–2022)'s *Minyeli Abdullah* (Abdullah the Minyeli 1967) and Şule Yüksel Şenler (1938–2019)'s *Huzur Sokağı* (Peace Street 1970) are among the seminal examples of this genre. In these novels, Islam is not limited to the realm of individual belief. It is constructed as the fundamental determinant of social order, moral understanding, and cultural identity. They mostly exhibit a message-centered structure and are far from seeking formal innovation. *Minyeli Abdullah* is a symbolic text that has attracted attention in the field of Islamist novels and largely defends religious resistance. The novel tells the story of Abdullah, who grew up in the city of Minya in Egypt and had a devout identity, his imprisonment due to his religious commitment and thoughts during the oppressive rule of King Farouk, and the hardships he experienced (Hekimoğlu İsmail 2023). While prison is depicted as a place of trial, Abdullah's faith remains unshaken, and the universal moral values of Islam are exalted through concepts such as solidarity and patience. The Qur'an is the fundamental reference that shapes Abdullah's consciousness and resistance.

Şule Yüksel Şenler (1938–2019) critically examines the female identity shaped by modernization, narrating the life stories of her characters as they navigate love, the search for identity, and the process of religious awakening. According to Gündüz, in the novel, "Female characters generally experience a process symbolized by the headscarf. Themes such as the search for individual love, spiritual purification, and social acceptance are intertwined in the plot. Texts that carry a mission rather than literary concerns represent the reflections of the Islamic lifestyle in the world of women" (Gündüz 2007, p. 333). In his novel, Şenler deals with the female identity symbolized by the headscarf in the context of the internal transformation of the individual caught between modernization

and tradition. The novel centers on events unfolding around the love story between the devout young Bilal and Feyza, a university student living with her mother on Huzur street. However, the love story takes shape through female identity, going beyond a mere personal connection. Feyza, initially a young woman who appears in circles that have embraced a modern lifestyle, adopts what is considered the correct Islamic way of life through her relationship with Bilal (Şenler 2003). Feyza's transformation is not merely the result of an individual decision. The changes she undergoes, from her clothing to her lifestyle, from her mindset to her social roles, represent the "ideal woman" model offered by Islamic values. The guidance novel is constructed around a specific affirmation rather than producing multiple meanings. While criticizing the public identity of women in the modernization of the Republic, the headscarf, privacy, and the institution of the family become tools for producing an alternative subject model. At this point, Şenler's novel questions the normative structure of modernity through gender, but at the same time proposes a new normative order.

The mass appeal of Islamic novels in the 1980s cannot be explained by a shift in aesthetic preferences. This development is closely linked to Turkey's neoliberal transformation process. Turgut Özal, who served as Prime Minister from 1983 to 1989 and then as President, is known for his policies of economic liberalization and reducing the state's role in the market. The economic liberalization implemented during this period added the field of cultural production to the market, and the liberalization of the publishing sector enabled popular novels to gain a wide circulation network. In this process, guidance novels dramatize the opposition between Islamic and secular worldviews (Göle 2019, p. 44; Çayır 2008, p. 35). However, this conflict is not a simple divergence of values. It is an objection directed at the formative effect of modernization on the individual. In the novels, modernization is represented as a process that uproots the individual, fragments their identity, and disconnects them from their cultural memory. This structure can be explained by Paul Ricoeur's concept of "narrative identity." According to Ricoeur, identity is a process that is constructed over time and gains coherence through narrative (Ricoeur 2005, p. 78). The transformation undergone by the protagonist in guidance novels is an attempt to reestablish the claim to continuity of a fragmented individual.

The fragmented self produced by modern life is reorganized within a belief-centered understanding of time. Thus, the novel codes the "wrong" life of the past as a point of departure while giving meaning to the future in a teleological direction. In other words, in the examples of *Minyeli Abdullah* and *Huzur Sokağı*, Islam is presented as a comprehensive reference capable of reshaping the social order, going beyond being an individual belief. This approach "treats the modernization of the Republic as a spiritual break and suggests that it has developed a 'cultural defense' against it" (Kadioğlu 1998, p. 42). Individual crisis and social disintegration are constructed simultaneously; the character's salvation is linked to a collective process of re-Islamization (Yavuz 2009, p. 84; Tuğal 2009, p. 44). The guidance novels play an effective role in the cultural formation of conservative identity (Çınar 2005, p. 110) and produce an alternative conception of history and social identity to the modernization process. "Religion does not remain merely a belief belonging to the private sphere, but establishes a comprehensive system of meaning that guides public, political, and cultural life" (Saktanber 2018, p. 152).

The academic literary canon in Turkey has largely been shaped around the search for innovation, formal experimentation, and narrative strategies focused on the individual's inner world. Critical literature plays a decisive role in the formation of this canon. Berna Moran's *A Critical Look at Turkish Novels* (*Türk Romanına Eleştirel Bir Bakış*, 3 volumes, 1983, 1990, 1994) systematically examines the Turkish novel through historical periods and narrative orientations, revealing the development of the modern novel. Gürsel Aytac's

Studies on the Contemporary Turkish Novel (*Çağdaş Türk Romanı Üzerine İncelemeler*, 1990) focuses on the narrative techniques and formal explorations of the contemporary novel, while Jale Parla's *The Novel from Don Quixote to the Present* (*Don Kişot'tan Bugüne Roman*, 2000) discusses the historical transformation of the novel genre and the modern understanding of narrative from a theoretical perspective. Fethi Naci's *The Novel and Social Change in Turkey* (*Türkiye'de Roman ve Toplumsal Değişme*, 1981) critically interprets the historical development of the Turkish novel by evaluating it alongside processes of social transformation. These studies have contributed to the shaping of the academic canon according to specific criteria by examining the Turkish novel primarily through modernist and postmodernist narrative forms and techniques. These critical perspectives place certain authors at the center of the 20th-century Turkish novel canon. Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901–1962), Oğuz Atay (1934–1977), Yusuf Atılgan (1921–1989), and Orhan Pamuk (1952) occupy a privileged position in this canon because they address the individual's existential experience and the inner world of modern man through complex structures. Expanding the possibilities of the novel through techniques such as multi-layered meaning production, ontological questioning, fragmented time construction, stream of consciousness, intertextuality, and irony, these writers have created aesthetic turning points in Turkish novels and have therefore become one of the main areas of academic criticism. On the other hand, guidance novels remain outside the canon because in critical literature, these texts are generally evaluated under the categories of "Islamic popular literature," "proselytizing novel," or "ideological narrative." For this reason, these texts are mostly examined in the context of their ideological stance rather than their literary value. However, the following point should not be overlooked. With the increased public visibility of conservative identity after 1980, guidance novels reached a wide readership. These texts conduct an identity debate based on the contrast between the secular-modern way of life and Islamic values. They construct the narrative of individual transformation in parallel with social transformation. They produce a new model of the conservative individual, particularly through urban, educated character types who experience a "spiritual void." In this respect, guidance novels are texts that document the cultural imagination of the religious middle class in post-1980 Turkey. The breadth of their readership and the circulation network they have created through publishing houses have increased the sociological impact of these novels. Therefore, even if they do not occupy a central place in the aesthetic canon, they cannot be ignored in cultural and social canon debates.

It should be noted that these novels have limited circulation in terms of translation and international readership. In other words, it is noteworthy that texts such as *Minyeli Abdullah* and *Huzur Sokağı* are primarily popular in Turkey and among conservative Turkish-speaking readers, but have not gained wide circulation in the international literary market. The main reasons for this include the fact that these novels are strongly rooted in a local ideological and cultural context, prioritize didactic messages over aesthetic innovation, and are only included in international publishing networks to a limited extent.

4. The Aesthetic Transformation of Religious and Sufi Representations in Turkish Novels After 1990

Parallel to the cultural transformation of society, the understanding that novels were entirely educational and didactic, which had previously been dominant, has gradually been left behind since the 1990s. The acceleration of the free market economy in Turkey in the 1980s and the spread of individual-centered ideologies directly affected literary production. Globalization, advances in communication technologies, and the rise of cultural pluralism have led to the emergence of new narrative forms that question the individual's emotional world, identity, and belief systems. In this atmosphere, themes such as individual existence,

inner journeys, metaphysical questions related to faith, and spiritual depth have become one of the central axes of post-1990 Turkish novels. According to Çayır, this change also heralds a formal transformation accompanying thematic expansion (Çayır 2007, p. 106). In this new period, literature began to treat religious and mystical themes not as a means of teaching or moral guidance, but rather as an aesthetic form reflecting the individual's inner world. The novel no longer has the sole purpose of conveying a message; instead, metaphorical depth, formal play, and the search for individual meaning come to the fore. However, this transformation is not homogeneous; different writers approach the same theme with different poetic and epistemological approaches.

Writers such as Nazan Bekiroğlu (1957) and İskender Pala (1958) blend religious and mystical themes with aesthetic sensitivity, crafting their language poetically and presenting Islamic references mostly on an allegorical or metaphorical level. Aesthetic concerns prevail over didactic aims in the authors' texts. The spiritual depth, multiplicity of meaning, and respect for tradition inherent in their narrative structures are elements that enhance the literary value of the texts. This approach, which transcends the traditional understanding of the guidance novel, has given rise to a hybrid genre that combines Islamic references with modern literary aesthetics.

Nazan Bekiroğlu's novel *Lâ: Sonsuzluk Hecesi* (*Lâ: The Syllable of Infinity* 2010) reimagines Sufi narrative within the aesthetics of the modern novel. The author narrates stories found in sacred texts, such as the first creation, the command to prostrate, Satan's rebellion, the creation of Eve, the love between Adam and Eve, the first sin, Satan's whisper, the expulsion to Earth, the conflict between Abel and Cain, and Adam's loneliness at the moment of death, through the author's interpretation and symbolic language. He incorporates symbolic motifs such as water, trees, horses, and dreams into the novel based on belief systems about the beginning of human history, thus creating a mythological and epic atmosphere for the work (Bekiroğlu 2010). As Çapan points out, the poetic nature of the language and the intensity of the imagery in the work give the text a "spiritual image" effect (Çapan 2010, p. 131). Here, religion functions less as a dogmatic claim to truth and more as an ontological depth sensed through aesthetic experience. In this respect, Bekiroğlu's approach departs from the guidance novel and offers a poetic proposal that multiplies meaning.

In İskender Pala's novels, Sufism and history are addressed within the context of the aesthetic reconstruction of cultural memory. Themes specific to classical Turkish literature, classical poems, historical figures, and events feature in his fictional world as elements of both aesthetic and cultural depth. Sufi references, allusions woven with verses and hadiths, submission to Allah, belief in destiny, and the human spiritual quest are woven into the fabric of the text. For example, in the work *Şah & Sultan* (King and Queen 2010), universal themes such as love, separation, betrayal, and power are intertwined with symbols from classical literature (Pala 2017). As Biricik emphasizes, symbols drawn from the Sufi tradition play a decisive role in expressing the characters' inner transformation and spiritual conflicts (Biricik 2024, p. 356). However, in Pala, the representation of historical continuity is more prominent than metaphysical questioning. Therefore, while ontological depth is central in Bekiroğlu, the aesthetic representation of cultural heritage is decisive in Pala. This difference emerges in the epistemological status of religious references. One establishes an experiential realm of truth, while the other produces a historical-cultural continuity.

Elif Şafak (1971) and Ahmet Ümit (1960), who take a different approach, mostly utilize religious and mystical motifs through a postmodern narrative approach and intertextual references. Elif Şafak's novel *Love* (The Forty Rules of Love 2009) brings together two separate storylines that run parallel to each other around the theme of love. The first story focuses on the inner awakening and journey of discovery of love by Ella Rubinstein, a

housewife living in Boston today who feels trapped in her routine life. The second narrative plane extends back to the 13th century, exploring the mystical friendship and love between Mevlânâ (1207–1273) and Şems-i Tebrizî. The novel consists of five symbolic sections: earth, water, fire, air, and wind. This choice emphasizes the reflections in the human soul of the fundamental elements that constitute the universe in the Sufi understanding (Şafak 2009). Thus, *Love* stands out as a novel that narrates both the individual and the universal and spiritual dimensions of love (Belkız 2013, p. 141). The novel, conceived as a cross-cultural love metaphor, employs methods such as intertextuality and narrative within narrative, bringing together different time planes and narrative voices to leave the mystical theme open to the contemporary reader's interpretation. The novel establishes a universal narrative network through love and mystical experience by connecting different cultural and intertextual references. Similarly, in Ahmet Ümit's novel *Bab-ı Esrar* (The Dervish Gate 2008), references to Mevlânâ create tension within the detective fiction plot. Religious references are shaped using techniques of pastiche, irony, and fiction within fiction, which are tools of postmodern aesthetics. The "evil" actions depicted in the novel, such as murder, betrayal, and revenge, are not based on absolute darkness; rather, they are interpreted as deficiencies resulting from the loss of "good" values such as love, forgiveness, and truth (Ümit 2019). Şems' absence or destruction appears as a result of lovelessness and turning away from truth rather than evil. Thus, Mevlânâ's Sufi approach, which defines evil not through existence but through absence, bears a deep parallelism with the themes of crime and atonement in the novel. This perspective, as Yüce also states, offers a way of understanding not only individual morality but also the relationship between the Creator and the created (Yüce 2022, p. 1006).

The treatment of religious and mystical themes in post-1990 Turkish novels varies according to different aesthetic orientations. Existing examples of novels show that these orientations fall into three main categories. In Nazan Bekiroğlu's novels, religion is constructed as an ontological field of experience that reveals the metaphysical dimension of individual existence. İskender Pala's novels, on the other hand, reinterpret religion and Sufism in the context of the aesthetic representation of tradition and the continuity of cultural memory. In contrast, in the texts of Elif Şafak and Ahmet Ümit, religious references function as aesthetic elements and cultural indicators within intertextual relationships.

The selected works demonstrate how the same theme is transformed through different narrative techniques and poetic choices. While novels from the Tanzimat period to the 1980s mostly addressed religion within the context of social order and ideology, post-1990 narratives incorporate the search for sacred individual identity and aesthetic choice. The influence of the global literary market, which has transformed Sufi figures into universal metaphors, further reinforces this process.

The transformation of religious and mystical themes in post-1990 Turkish novels cannot be explained solely by Turkey's internal cultural dynamics. The expansion of international literary markets and the global circulation of Turkish novels through translation have also played a significant role in this process. David Damrosch defines world literature as the circulation of texts beyond their own cultural boundaries through translation, which can enrich the meaning of texts (Damrosch 2013). Based on this argument, the publication of novels by foreign publishing houses and their reach to different reader communities have indirectly influenced writers' narrative strategies and aesthetic preferences, leading to the reimagining of religious and mystical themes within a more universal, philosophical, and existential framework. Thus, Sufism has transcended being merely an element of a local belief and cultural sphere, and has been addressed within a broader intellectual context associated with the individual's search for meaning, inner journey, and questioning. This evolution also becomes apparent at the intertextual level. Novels have developed a

multi-layered structure that engages in dialogue not only with Islamic sources such as the Qur'an and classical Sufi texts, but also with modern novelistic techniques and mystical narratives in world literature. Thus, religious and Sufi themes have been reinterpreted with different cultural and aesthetic codes within the global circulation of literature, going beyond being a reference area based on local tradition. Elif Şafak and Ahmet Ümit are two of the most internationally circulated writers of contemporary Turkish literature. The translation of their works into numerous languages (English, German, Russian, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, Arabic, Polish, Finnish, etc.) is not only made possible by translation opportunities and publishing house support, but is also directly linked to the suitability of their themes for global reader interest and the authors' inclusion in international promotion networks.

5. Conclusions

Religious discourse in the art of the novel does not settle for static and one-dimensional content. It creates a narrative that evolves over time, whose meaning is reconstituted and interpreted through the social dynamics of each era. In Turkish novels, religious discourse possesses a structure that is too dynamic and pluralistic to be reduced to a single form, period, or meaning. This discourse appears in texts sometimes as the voice of a suppressed truth, sometimes as the driving force of individual transformation, and sometimes as the bearer of cultural memory. From the Tanzimat to the present day, religion appears as the spokesperson for silence, conflict, or an inner quest. This study examines the aesthetic and social contexts of religious discourse in Turkish novels from the Tanzimat to the present day through a qualitative text analysis. The comparative analysis, conducted using novel examples representing different historical periods, reveals how religious themes are addressed in novels through narrative strategies and aesthetic orientations.

The findings show that religious discourse has been reinterpreted in line with changing social and intellectual contexts throughout history. While religion was addressed as a theme related to modernization debates during the Tanzimat, Servet-i Fünûn, and Milli Edebiyat periods, it gained a new position in the context of secularism and social transformation during the Republican period. The increased public visibility of religion after 1950 broadened ideological and cultural debates in novels, while the proliferation of Islamic novels after 1980 and the interpretation of religious and mystical themes within different aesthetic orientations since the 1990s have revealed a diversification in the relationship between religion and novel aesthetics. These developments show that religious discourse in modern Turkish novels constitutes a rich narrative field connected not only to ideological themes but also to individual identity and cultural memory.

The study covers a broad historical period but is based on a limited number of novel examples and primarily adopts a text-centered analysis method. In the future, examining a broader corpus of novels and using interdisciplinary approaches (narrative theory, cultural studies, sociology of religion, etc.) will enable a deeper understanding of the aesthetic and social dimensions of religious representations in Turkish novels. However, this study aims to contribute to the evaluation of the relationship between religion and novel aesthetics within the axis of historical continuity and change by revealing the transformation of religious discourse in Turkish novels from the Tanzimat period to the present day from a comparative perspective.

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