

# The Mystical Continuum: Sufi Thought And The Evolution Of The Turkish Islamic Novel

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“Hakikat deryasına dalan erenler / Nefsini öldürüp can bulan erenler.”

(“Those saints who plunged into the sea of Truth / Killed their ego and found life anew.”)

— Ahmad Yasawi, Divan-i Hikmet

**Abstract:** This essay examines how Sufi thoughts developed in Turkish Islamic novels as a continuation of medieval mystical ideas. It states that contemporary Turkish Islamic novels reinterpret the metaphysical principles of classical Sufi thought while also recreating the image of the saint as a dynamic agent capable of changing moral and cultural norms. This study places the fictional portrayal of Sufi figures within a broader literary, historical, and spiritual context, drawing on the writings of authors such as Aydın Hız, Mustafa Necati Sepetçioğlu, Mustafa Çevik, and Fatih Duman. The article examines how Turkish Islamic novels combine continuity and innovation, creating a unique literary space where faith, identity, and modernity intersect, using the theoretical frameworks proposed by scholars such as Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, Anushik Martirosyan, Talal Asad, and William Chittick.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Turkish prose, Islamic novel, Sufi thought, image of the saint, Yasawiyya tradition.

**Introduction:** The revival of Sufi imagery in Turkish literature reflects a spiritual and esthetic return to the origins of Islamic mysticism. In contemporary fiction, the image of the saint has once again become a central moral and metaphysical figure, whereas previously it was limited to hagiographic accounts and manaqib-namas. In response to the spiritual emptiness of secular modernity, Turkish novelists are increasingly turning to the language of mysticism. This revival is linked to a global phenomenon known as “re-enchantment,” described by Charles Taylor and Talal Asad. In these societies, religious symbols acquire ethical and imaginative power. The Turkish Islamic novel serves as a literary laboratory for reconciling tradition and transformation within this revival. Once, religious poetry and oral stories about saints were means of expressing faith, while today, prose literature adapts mystical ethics to modern existential dilemmas. Authors such as Mustafa Necati Sepetçioğlu and Fatih Duman are reinterpreting the legacy of figures like Ahmed Yesevi, Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, and Hacı Bektaş Veli, transforming them into mirrors of modern spiritual experience. They also develop the central

tenet of Sufi philosophy, which states that human perfection (insan-i kamil) is constantly unfolding rather than being static. In Islamic culture, the saintly image is a semiotic structure that embodies the moral principles and cosmological understanding of the community, rather than simply a historical or religious figure, as Ahmet Yaşar Ocak observed. Thus, the Turkish Islamic novel serves as a continuation of the mystical discourse of the Middle Ages, as well as a means of renewing ethical consciousness in the modern world. The continuity of Sufi thought in Turkish literature cannot be interpreted solely as a repetition of earlier versions. Rather, it's a process of adapting spiritual practices to new historical circumstances, which Talal Asad calls the “genealogy of the ethical self.” In contemporary literature, the Sufi path (tariqa), which was traditionally built around spiritual discipline and the guidance of a sheikh, is being reinterpreted as an inner journey through crisis, doubt, and redemption. This typology shows that the Turkish Islamic novel is a dynamic field of experimentation rather than a single genre.

The ability of Sufi thought to develop while retaining its metaphysical essence speaks volumes,

says Martirosyan. Modern artistic prose draws inspiration from the Sufi motif of transformation (hal). Once a hagiographic account of miracles, "The Journey of a Saint" is being reinterpreted as a story of moral resistance and ethical awakening. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak's research deepens our understanding of this theoretical concept. In his studies of Turkish Sufism, he emphasizes that sainthood (walayat) is a cultural and theological category. Ocak argues that the image of the saint in Ottoman society served as an intermediary between the divine order and social reality, connecting the metaphysical and the everyday. Although Turkish writers currently maintain this duality, they transfer it to a secular literary context, where the image of the saint is used as a symbol of unity, self-sacrifice, and transcendence in the context of social fragmentation. William Chittick defined the "imaginal world," or *alam al-khayal*, as an intermediary between matter and spirit, as the basis for the theoretical foundation of Sufi esthetics.

Through symbolic language, dream motifs, and mystical dialogs, Turkish writers have reinterpreted this imaginary dimension. This is especially true for writers who wrote after the 1980s. As a result, the Islamic novel takes on a hybrid character, which is ontologically fluid and simultaneously realistic and allegorical. Scholars like Mircea Eliade note that religious imagination exists in stories and rituals. In this sense, the Turkish Islamic novel transforms the saint's hagiographic journey into an existential one. The tension between secular modernity and mystical continuity gives rise to what can be called a "post-secular aesthetic," in which literature serves as a new vessel for old wisdom. In Turkish Islamic novels, the image of the saint, also known as the *Veli*, plays an important role as a character and moral example. Saints such as Ahmed Yasawi, Haji Bektash Veli, and Yunus Emre embodied ethical ideals and spiritual authority in classical Sufi poetry and traditions. Their biographies, miracles, and teachings were storytelling tools designed to convey moral wisdom and cultivate the readers' conscience. This archetype persists in modern Turkish Islamic novels, but in altered and psychologically complex forms. Authors such as Aydın Hız, Fatih Duman, Mustafa Necati Sepetçioğlu, and Mustafa Çevik adapt the image of the saint to modern life, highlighting the conflict between spiritual and worldly desires. The archetype of the saint in Aydın Hız's "Benim gonlum bir kustur" is reinterpreted as a moral compass directed toward social and existential crises. The protagonist's esthetic dilemma reflects the traditional Sufi struggle between the *nafs* (ego) and the *ruh* (spirit). The saint is now not just a historical figure, but also a symbol of morality and transformative

action. In "Zamanın Oğlu," Mustafa Çevik highlights the human side of Ahmed Yasawi's spiritual journey. Yasawi is depicted as a mystic who experiences doubts, loneliness, and the hardships of daily existence, demonstrating that holiness is a process, not a status conferred at birth. The novel highlights the pedagogical role of the saint, as his life serves as an example for readers, helping them grow morally and spiritually. Similarly, in "Pir" Fatih Duman's presents the saint as a mediator between social reality and divine truth, emphasizing ethical behavior rather than miraculous deeds.

The function of the saint as a symbol of ontological wholeness is also examined in Turkish Islamic novels. Embodying both human imperfection and divine aspiration, the saint mediates between earthly life and higher ideals. The storyline arc of the saint, conversations, and self-reflection contribute to the main character's moral and spiritual development. Thus, the holy image in fiction is an active principle that structures the plot, moral logic, and symbolic universe of the work, rather than a passive relic of hagiography. According to Fuad Köprülü and Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, the continuity of the holy archetype in Turkish literature reflects a broader cultural memory. Ocak emphasizes the ethical function of sainthood as a prism thru which social and personal transformations can be understood, while Köprülü notes that the integration of Sufi metaphysics into popular idioms allowed the image of the saint to remain accessible throughout the centuries. The saint embodies both of these aspects in modern literature novels: he is morally instructive and narratively productive, creating a bridge between mystical continuity and modern literary experiments. The narrative structure of Turkish Islamic novels is based on Sufi ethics. There is a fundamental internal conflict between selfish desire and the striving for divine alignment. The narrative often describes the *suluk*, a Sufi path consisting of stages reflecting divine love (*ishk*), spiritual struggle (*mujahada*), and repentance (*tawba*). These stages are represented in the modern novel thru moral crises, relationship tension, and the protagonist's reflections on historical, social, or existential dilemmas. The transmission of Sufi metaphysics depends on symbolism.

Natural elements, architectural motifs, and temporal cycles are used to depict the stages of the spiritual path. Recurring motifs include water, which often represents divine mercy, the desert and introspection, and purification. The interaction of these characters with the plot arcs turns reading into an act of observation. History is now used as a practical guide to moral and spiritual insight, rather than just a theory. Sufi ethics influence how novels depict social

relationships. Saints are depicted as people who help justice, maintain harmony in society, and embody altruism. The moral psychology of novels focuses on values such as compassion, humility, and self-control. The authors translate centuries-old mystical principles into modern ethics, placing these traits within the framework of modern narrative conflict. Additionally, mysticism and historical realism are often combined in contemporary Turkish Islamic novels. For example, the protagonist's religious struggles are interwoven into everyday decisions, depicting an ordinary social environment in Hiz's works. This leads to literature that maintains its commitment to Sufi moral philosophy while also employing modern narrative sophistication. This synthesis demonstrates a broader continuity of the mystical paradigm in Turkish literature: mystical ideas evolve, but their core ethical and spiritual function remains unchanged.

## CONCLUSION

The Turkish Islamic novel demonstrates a remarkable continuity of Sufi thought, reflecting both the evolution and preservation of mystical paradigms. The image of the saint, inherited from prominent figures such as Ahmed Yasawi and Yunus Emre, is preserved as a narrative and moral principle that shapes the protagonist's moral path and the novel's symbolic universe. Contemporary Turkish writers are reinterpreting holiness and creating narratives that serve as intermediaries between the secular and the sacred, the temporal and the transcendent. The genre shows that Turkish literature not only preserves religious motifs from the past but also serves as an active space for discussing contemporary ethical and spiritual issues. Authors can explore timeless questions about the meaning of life, moral responsibility, and the pursuit of the divine in accessible literary forms through the integration of Sufi esthetics – symbolism, narrative structure, and moral psychology – into modern novels. This study highlights the enduring vitality of the mystical continuum in the Turkish literary consciousness, tracing its path from medieval hagiography to modern fiction. The central figure remains the holy image, which serves as a moral compass, the driving force of the narrative, and a bridge connecting modernity and tradition. Turkish Islamic novels continue to demonstrate that faith, ethics, and narrative creativity are closely intertwined, producing literature that is culturally significant and spiritually profound.

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