

***Writing in Red:  
Literature and Revolution across Turkey and the Soviet Union***

Nergis Ertürk, Columbia University Press, 2024. 360 pp.: ISBN 9780231214858

**Berfin Çiçek** 

University of Washington, Seattle, WA, United States

Keywords: Marxist literary aesthetics, Soviet influence on Turkish literature, Nâzım Hikmet, Mikhail Bakhtin, Suat Derviş, Vâlâ Nureddin

In *Writing in Red: Literature and Revolution across Turkey and the Soviet Union* (2024), Nergis Ertürk examines the impact of Soviet artistic forms on Turkish literature during the 1920s, 1940s, and 1960s. She explores not only the works of prominent figures such as Nâzım Hikmet and Vâlâ Nureddin but also highlights the contributions of lesser-studied writers and artists like Suat Derviş and Abidin Dino, who engaged with Marxist literary aesthetics in Turkey. Ertürk closely reads the literary works and delves into the historical and political relationships between the Turkish Republic and the Soviet Union. While Ertürk provides a critical analysis through close engagement with the texts, she also situates the literary networks within their broader historical and political contexts. In this way, her book adopts an interdisciplinary approach to literary and cultural studies, combining the sociology of literature with historicization and close reading, treating narrative as a vital source for exploring cultural and political history.

Ertürk's comparative analysis of Turkish Marxist literature and Soviet aesthetics is informed by postcolonial theory, drawing connections between the two while examining their shared ideological foundations and political institutions. Her analysis is grounded in key theoretical frameworks of discourse theory and deconstruction. In her close readings of the texts, she further engages with Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts of "dialogism" and "heteroglossia", utilizing them to deepen her examination of the literary dynamics. Moreover, Gayatri Spivak's concept of subalternity emerges as the central framework in her analysis. However, she does not address the postcolonial dynamics of the early republican era, nor does she engage with the broader discussions of postcolonialism in Turkey. On one hand, such a discussion would strengthen her argument regarding the centrality of Marxist Turkish literature within the Soviet republic of letters. On the other hand, it would shed light on how the literati of the Soviet republic of letters perceived Turkish Marxist literature as part of a broader revolutionary literary tradition in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The book consists of two main parts. The first part involves the first two chapters, while the second part includes the last three chapters. Ertürk titles the first part as “Genres of Entangled Revolutions” and the second as “Marxian Form in the Periphery: Modernist Socialist Realisms”. The initial observation of the titles suggests a contradictory implication with “entangled” and “periphery”. Such a titling still assumes a centrality and peripherality. However, Ertürk argues that Turkish Marxist literature is deeply entangled with Bolshevik Marxian literary traditions, contributing both to the aesthetic formation of the “Soviet republic of letters” and the articulation of its master narratives of the Anatolian Revolution. To underscore the significance of the concept of “entangled revolutions,” Ertürk maps the intellectual and political networks connecting communist cadres in Turkey with the Bolshevik government in her introduction to the book. In this regard, she proposes a vision of Turkish literature not as a peripheral phenomenon, but as a central and active participant in Marxist literary production.

The opening chapter, “The Turkish War of Independence in Literature and Film,” Ertürk argues that, alongside official exchanges between the newly founded Turkish Republic and the Soviet Union, informal interactions between Turkish and Soviet artists such as Nâzım Hikmet and Yutkevich played a key role in shaping a critique of the “Asiatic despot” trope within Turkish literature. This chapter examines the shifting dynamics in representations of the Turkish War of Independence. For instance, in *Bir Millet Uyaniyor* (1932), the earliest film on the subject directed by Muhsin Ertuğrul, the focus centers on a “fetishistic” portrayal of Mustafa Kemal. However, this heroic singularity gradually gives way in later works, particularly in the writings of Nâzım Hikmet, to depictions that center the agency and struggles of ordinary people.

Following the idea of the exchange of the revolutionary master plots between the two cultures, the second chapter, “Vâlâ Nureddin’s Comic Materialism and the Sexual Revolution”, Ertürk challenges the view of Vâlâ Nureddin in Turkish literary history as the biographer of Nâzım Hikmet. She argues that Vâlâ’s *Baltacı ile Katerina* (1928) dismantles the phallogocentric and bourgeois family concept of the early republic and offers a vision grounded in sexual enlightenment and freedom. However, Vâlâ navigates the Kemalist suppression of communist cadres by reimagining the story of Baltacı Mehmet Paşa, rather than directly confronting the republican discourses of gender and sexuality. Since the Turkish liberation movement failed to secure sexual emancipation for women, Vâlâ engages with the question of sexuality through the ideological prism of Soviet thought. In doing so, he positions himself within a broader leftist moral discourse and deconstructs the figure of the “fallen woman” prevalent in early republican Turkish literature, replacing her with a female subject who actively asserts her desire.

Like Vâlâ, Suat Derviş crafts a “positive hero” in *Fosforlu Cevriye* (1962) through a female protagonist who embodies the “ethics of the communist act.” In the third chapter “The Prostitute Cevriye as Positive Hero”, Ertürk interprets Derviş’s narrative as a subversive rewriting of the Soviet archetype of the communist mother in Maksim Gorky’s *The Mother* (1906), replacing her with the figure of a prostitute. In this way, *Fosforlu Cevriye* emerges as a feminist-modernist intervention within the framework of Marxist aesthetics. Since the prostitute in the novella conceals leaflets and printing equipment for her implied communist and fugitive lover, Ertürk

interprets Cevriye's journey as Derviş's subtle critique of the paternalistic, gendered attitudes within Turkish communist circles, advocating instead for a more egalitarian revolutionary ethos.

As one of the lesser-studied artists of the republican era, Abidin Dino gives voice to the "urban subaltern", as stated by Ertürk, through his peasant theater plays. In the fourth chapter, "Abidin Dino's Peasant Theater and the Soviet *Faktura*," Ertürk interprets Dino's theatrical work as a form of intellectual activism aligned with Marxist anticolonial movements. Contrary to the conventional view that labels Dino's work as surrealist, Ertürk emphasizes his artistic imagination as fundamentally rooted in socialist realism. Ertürk argues that Dino reimagines traditional village performance forms such as *ortaoyunu* and *köy seyirlik oyunları* by fusing them with Soviet aesthetic principles, particularly the emphasis on three-dimensionality and embodied spectatorship through the use of both handmade and industrially produced objects on stage.

Ahmed Nuri, who wrote a book review on Ertürk's *Writing in Red*, evaluates this work as an invaluable contribution of Ertürk to comparative literary studies and the study of Turkish literature within area studies (Nuri 2024). Although Nuri criticizes Ertürk's categorization of some authors as Marxist and her overlooking of some literary figures from the Balkans, he appraises Ertürk's effort to create a non-Eurocentric literary model for modernism. One critique Ahmed Nuri raises about Ertürk's book is its omission of certain literary figures from the Balkans and beyond, as well as their connections to Communist intellectual networks. However, Ertürk's selection of literary figures reinforces her central argument: that prominent Turkish authors such as Nâzım Hikmet were aligned with the Soviet republic of letters. This approach highlights the significance of alternative reading practices and literary classifications within the Turkish intellectual sphere. In this sense, Ertürk's book does not aim to present a comprehensive anthology of Turkish-language authors connected to Communist networks; instead, it offers an alternative framework for studying mainstream Turkish literature, one that emerges as a major contribution to Turkish literary studies within the broader landscape of world literature beyond the West and its critical heritage.

To advance her aim of offering alternative ways of reading Turkish literary history, Ertürk devotes the final chapter of the book entirely to the poetry of Nâzım Hikmet. She interprets his works through the lens of "translational poetics," arguing that Hikmet challenges both Turkish and Western literary paradigms through an alternative model of authorship shaped by his acquaintance with the revolutionary literary networks. Ertürk further examines Hikmet's treatment of 'time' in his poetry as a mode of resistance against the ideology of linear modernization, highlighting how his position within the Soviet republic of letters enabled a critical stance toward both Western conceptions of modernity and the linguistic nationalism promoted by the founding cadres of the Turkish Republic.

While Ertürk notes the visits of Soviet delegates to Turkey aiming at producing documentaries and distributing propaganda as well as the hosting of Turkish intellectuals in the Soviet Union and at international gatherings such as the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress, the absence of a dedicated chapter on the reception of Turkish Marxist literature in the Soviet Union is a missed opportunity. If the revolutions are indeed entangled, such a chapter could have explored

how the Soviet intellectuals responded to Turkish Marxist writers and the extent to which these Turkish authors contributed to the discourse surrounding the Bolshevik Revolution. In this regard, the book remains overly centered on Turkey, ultimately falling short of fully substantiating its claim of revolutionary entanglement.

Overall, Ertürk's book opens a path for future research by young researchers who can use it as a model for comparative analysis, as the book elaborates on transnational and translational literary networks between Marxist Turkish literature and the Soviet Republic. Finally, Ertürk's *Writing in Red* challenges the dominant paradigm that Turkish literary modernism developed solely under the influence of Western literary models or early nationalist reforms; instead, she demonstrates that it was a complex process shaped by non-Western revolutionary legacies and competing visions of authorship on the national level.

#### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Prof. Selim Sırrı Kuru for his valuable critical contributions during the text analyses.

#### Financial Support Statement

This research was supported by the Hall-Ammerer Fellowship, awarded by the University of Washington.

#### Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest related to this study.

#### Statement on the Use of AI and AI-Assisted Tools

In this study, artificial intelligence-supported tools were used to a limited extent within the acceptable boundaries defined in *Nesir: Journal of Literary Studies'* Artificial Intelligence Use Policy; all content has been reviewed and approved in its final form by the author.

### **Bibliography**

- Nuri, Ahmed. 2024. "Writing in Red: Literature and Revolution across Turkey and the Soviet Union, by Nergis Ertürk." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 56 (3): 559–62. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743824000928>