



## VENICE FACING ACQUA ALTA

YÜKSELEN SULARA KARŞI VENEDİK

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### Abstract

Venice has always fascinated people from all walks of life, from all over the country until the twentieth century. This paper aims at discussing the classical image of Venice versus the recent negative image of the city, which, despite its beauty and its magical atmosphere, renders people uneasy and anxious as the sea water unexpectedly covers Saint Mark's Square and the vicinities. This phenomenon is qualified as "Acqua Alta". The year 2019 has been fatal for the city because the sea water has reached very high levels and has caused serious damage to the artistic and the historical treasures of the city. To discuss this topic, various works have been taken into consideration, putting the emphasis on two novels from Italy and Turkey which depict the phenomenon of Acqua Alta as part of the daily life in Venice with its fear and anxiety reflected in the protagonists: Acqua Alta by Donna Leon and Resimli Dünya by Nedim Gürsel.

### Öz

Venedik, XX. yüzyıla kadar her zaman için dünyanın her yerinden ve her kesimden insanı büyülemiştir. Bu çalışmada Venedik kentinin güzelliği ve tılsımı nedeniyle şimdiye kadar olan imgesinin, deniz suyunun beklenmedik biçimde San Marco Meydanı'nı ve civarını sular altında bırakması nedeniyle insanlarda yarattığı huzursuzluk ve endişe nedeniyle ortaya çıkmış olan son zamanlardaki olumsuz imgesi ele alınmaktadır. Deniz suyunun bu şekilde yükselmesine Acqua alta adı verilmiştir. 2019 yılı Venedik açısından zor bir yıl olmuştur, zira deniz suyu çok yüksek seviyelere yükselmiş ve kentin sanatsal ve tarihi hazinelerine ciddi biçimde zarar vermiştir. Bu konu ele alınırken çeşitli yapıtlar incelenmiş fakat ağırlık Türkiye ve İtalya'dan birer roman üzerinde yoğunlaşmıştır: Donna Leon tarafından yazılan Acqua Alta ve Nedim Gürsel tarafından yazılan Resimli Dünya.

*I stood in Venice, on the Bridge of Sighs;  
A palace and a prison on each hand:*

*I saw from out the wave her structures  
rise As from the stroke of the enchanter's  
wand: A thousand years their cloudy  
wings expand Around me, and a dying  
Glory smiles*

*O'er the far times, when many a subject  
land Look'd to the winged Lion's marble  
piles,*

*Where Venice sate in state, throned on  
her hundred isles! (Byron IV-I)*

## INTRODUCTION

Venice is a dreamlike city which for years and years has attracted artists and writers from all over the world such as Goethe, Lord Byron, Turner, Chateaubriand, Theophile Gautier, Verdi, George Sand, Alfred de Musset, Wagner, Rossini, Richard Strauss, Respighi, Proust, Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Henry James, John Ruskin and so many others. Most of these famous visitors are influenced by the incredible beauty of the paintings by the Venetian painters such as Giovanni Bellini and his brother Gentile Bellini, Giorgione, Titian, Canaletto, Tintoretto and Paolo Veronese. The British painter Turner has highly contributed to the portrayal of this wonderful city. English Romantic painter, printmaker and watercolourist J. M. W. Turner's paintings of Venice are also of universal recognition. Apart from the coffee houses on St. Mark's Square, another important point of attraction in the city has been Harry's Bar founded in 1931, declared by the Italian Ministry for Cultural Affairs as a national landmark in 2001. Among the notable customers of the Bar, we can quote Baron Philippe de Rothschild, Aristotle Onassis, Truman Capote, Peggy Guggenheim, Charlie Chaplin, Orson Welles, Arturo Toscanini, James Stewart, Alfred Hitchcock, Woody Allen, Ernest Hemingway, George Clooney, Guglielmo Marconi and many others that we cannot quote in this space. Marco Polo, Carlo Goldoni, Giacomo Casanova, Antonio Vivaldi are some of the well-known Venetians. This beautiful city owes its beauty in great extent to two foreign architects: Andrea Palladio and Jacopo Sansovino. The islands of Murano, Burano, St. Giorgio and the Lido are great attractions for tourists. The names we have quoted are people who are universally acknowledged as the best examples in their own fields whether they are writers, actors, inventors, musicians or members of the royal families. These people gradually ceased to visit the city starting from the second half of the Twentieth Century which more or less coincides with the appearance of *Acqua alta*.

Each time one comes to Venice, it reflects back another self, another dream, as if it were partly your own mirror. "The air is full of the spirits of all those who have lived here, worked here, loved here... Byron, Browning, Ruskin, Turner, Tintoretto, Mahler, Stravinsky... Shakespeare. Was Shakespeare ever here? (Jong 8).

Nevertheless, Venice is still a unique romantic city where people want to declare their marriage proposals or spend their honeymoon. Most illustrious visitors of Venice have immortalized the city in their works such as paintings, poems, novels, musical compositions or they have left their memoirs. In the past people would go to Venice also for cultural reasons.

Venice is a city that has only passionate lovers or vehement detractors; no one is indifferent to her. I was more lover than tourist, but lovers are, of course, the most passionate tourists... But even more than the famous dead I loved the obscure dead, particularly the foreigners who had died in this feverish lagoon city. (Jong 103).

Beneath the flood of tourists lies a deeper phenomenon that is a defining aspect of our 21st century society: Globalisation. As our world develops technologically and communication and travel links between countries become stronger, places like Venice play host to countless anonymous stories, triumphs and tragedies. Two of these parallel but nonintersecting lives are recounted in the novels analysed in this article. In the words of Saussy, *“all literature has always been comparative, watered by many streams... Not just influence, but consciousness of difference and relation, is at work in these collisions”* (Saussy 5-6). Globalisation allows two separate characters, one from each novel, to experience, in separate spatial-temporal realms, their own stories filled with their own unique fears, anxieties, perceptions and hopes. They are connected via space, but not time, through the phenomenon of acqua alta.

This paper will attempt to present a comparative study taking into consideration two novels and two writers. The main theme to serve as the bridge connecting these two works is the decadence in the image of the city of Venice which can be observed approximately during the last 50 years. As one of the main causes has been the appearance of Acqua alta, the aim of this paper, as stated in the abstract, is to put into evidence the changing image of Venice in the negative sense due to the threat of Acqua alta. In the past, when people wrote about Venice they used to underline its beauty and its magic whereas in the recent novels the authors prefer to depict the negative aspects of the city just like Acqua alta. We will examine this issue presented by two novelists from two different countries. Nedim Gürsel is an internationally known writer who lives both in Turkey and France. Donna Leon is a well-known American writer who has lived in Venice for over thirty years during which she wrote more than twenty novels with Inspector Brunetti as the major hero. Following this long sojourn in Venice, she moved to a small village in Switzerland in 2015.

## **THE ACQUA ALTA PHENOMENON**

It has been argued in academic circles for almost the last 25 years that Venice is gradually sinking into the sea. In the 20th Century there were efforts to save Venice. In addition, the seawater flooding the city has turned into a serious danger for the city. A well-known scholar on this subject, Elina Gugliuzzo, describes her anxiety in such words:

The frequency of flooding in Venice has drastically increased over the last 50 years as a major consequence of natural and anthropogenic land subsidence, and a more active lagoon hydrodynamics induced partly by deepening of the largest navigation channels. Is Venice dying, a victim of its environment and of its own success? Many people fear so: the local residents who observe the decline of their beloved city, the Italian authorities, the millions of visitors. (Gugliuzzo, "A Jewel at Risk..." 1).

Sea water is entering the houses, hotels, restaurants, destroying whatever gets in its way. The Venetians raise a wooden separators at the threshold and they have pumps inside the house which automatically function the moment water enters into the room. Definitely, these minor precautions can help but they need a the drastic solution for the city to go on existing also in the future. Venice, as one of the great centers of attention in the world, attract people from all over the world. In our era, globalisation is one of the most important characteristics. Different people with totally different backgrounds find themselves in Venice and they build their own stories around the same phenomenon, in this case, Acqua Alta and they go through the same fear and anxiety. This can be applied to all our protagonists: Inspector Brunetti, Flavia, Brett and Kâmil Uzman. They belong to different walks of life, different origins but they are united under the umbrella of Acqua alta. This proves that It is a universal problem which should be shared and fought against by all humanity not only the Venetians alone. That is why many people, especially those living in the Veneto Region, are deeply concerned about this problem academic simposia are organized regularly, trying to find a solution to all these problems related to the sea which is essential for the survival of the city but at the time has a destructive effect:

The problem of high tide (*Acqua Alta*) in Venice is becoming more and more serious, due to recent changes in the morphology of the lagoon. High tide causes problems for pedestrians (rubber boots are always fashionable in Venice), public transportation (boats can not run

under some bridges and alternative routes are activated), and shops (who try to defend themselves with fences). It is essential for the population to be informed in time, so that the appropriate measures can be taken. (Avanzini et al. 184).

Each Venetian has a pair of high rubber boots next to the door which they wear the moment they hear the siren blowing which normally Western ears used to hear during the air raids of the WW2. The municipality is constructing, at tremendous speed, a scaffolding all over the city which enables people caught in the street to return home without trouble as the sea water attacks the city furiously and there is the danger of drowning. While the locals try to put into practice the necessary steps as quickly as possible to ensure the safety of all citizens, the tourists do not seem to be worried as they take photos and selfies which they upload to the internet. They, most probably, consider *Acqua alta* a unique experience. But the situation is extremely critical for the city. It not only threatens the historical palaces and the museums but as we focus on this paper, it also gives a lot of damage to the eternal image of Venice, as reflected also in the recent novels. The year 2019 has been an unfortunate year:

On Nov. 12, Venice experienced the worst flood since 1966, with the high water reaching 1.84 meters, or 6 feet, above sea level. A combination of rising tides and winds of more than 75 miles per hour from two different directions caused massive waves to crash into Venice. St. Mark's crypt and mosaic floor have been damaged, the baroque church of St. Moses and the city university, in a 15th-century Gothic palace, have been flooded. A man died from electrocution when the water caused a short circuit (Momigliano).

*Acqua Alta* keeps repeating itself from time to time also in 2020 which renders people who care for Venice deeply worried. The Italian writer Tiziano Scarpa in his guide *Venice Is a Fish* describes the city both geographically and culturally, depicting *Acqua Alta* as follows:

*Acqua alta* is a disaster that started in the twentieth century; (...) The sirens that sounded the alarm during the air raids of the Second World War have been kept on top of the campanili. Now they announce sea raids, when the *acqua alta* is about to rise: they wake you at five, six in the morning. The sleepy inhabitants fix steel bulkheads to their front doors and slide little dams into the rubberised metal frames attached to their doorposts. Even the ground-floor windows facing the water-swollen canals are reinforced:

more often there's really nothing to be done, the water gushes from the mangole covers, surges up through cracks in the floor, stains the furniture, drenches the walls, ruins the paintwork. Tourists love it, take snapshots, walk about barefoot with their trousers rolled up fisherman-style. (Scarpa 22-23).

Acqua Alta has become part of the life of the Venetian. Authorities are trying to solve this problem through a project (MOSE) which has been approved in 1980 but has not been completed yet. Acqua Alta is explained as such:

Such "high waters" are the unusually high tides that periodically fill the Lagoon and, as a result, flood Venice itself to a varying degree. An acqua alta is brought about when winds from the southeast—known as the sirocco—coincide with the regular cycle of lunar high tides, an occurrence that can add anywhere from twenty to fifty extra centimeters to the normal tidal crest. The phenomenon has been recorded in Venice for centuries—the first aqua granda was mentioned in 782—and, as everyone knows, occasions of flooding are becoming more frequent and higher. (Davis and Marvin 189).

#### **ACQUA ALTA BY DONNA LEON (1996)**

The American writer Donna Leon, in her novel *Acqua Alta*, presents the daily life in Venice and the threat of Acqua Alta, within the framework of a crime scene. *Acqua Alta* deals with an attack and a murder which take place in Venice. The case is assigned to the Venetian detective Guido Brunetti who investigates and solves the crime. While presenting the plot, Donna Leon introduces the problem of Acqua Alta as part of the daily life in today's Venice. She also depicts how the city is influenced negatively by this phenomenon.

The air was heavy and damp, presaging rain, and that meant they might be awakened in the night by the shrill blast of the sirens. He hated acqua alta with the passion that all Venetians felt for it, felt an anticipatory rage at the gaping tourists who would cluster together on the raised wooden boards, giggling, pointing, snapping pictures and blocking decent people who just wanted to get to work or do their shopping so they could get inside where it was dry and be rid of the bother, the mess, the constant irritation that the unstoppable waters brought to the city. (Leon 53).

The two women in Donna Leon's novel are Flavia, an internationally known Italian opera singer and Brett, who is a respectable American archaeologist. The two ladies have a lesbian relationship. Inspector Detective Guido Brunetti is married. He is a happy and a positive person, exactly the opposite of the Kamil Uzman character mentioned in the following novel. Brunetti senses that Acqua Alta is approaching and automatically does what he has to do to protect himself and his family just like any Venetian living in Venice would do. Whereas, for Kâmil Uzman, Acqua Alta constitutes a great source of worry and fear.

The Venetians naturally mind the issue of Acqua Alta which renders daily life sometimes quite difficult but on the whole, they accept it as they have no other choice. They invent practical solutions to protect themselves and their houses from the attack of the water. They are well-organized. They know that the high waters will last for some time and then everything will go back to normal. There is no panic caused by Acqua alta among the local people.

Most of the times, the flooding is limited to a rather small area around the San Marco square and it only lasts a couple of hours, until the tide changes again. Exceptional high tides (140 cm above sea level), which correspond with a flooding of approximately 50% of the city, have happened only times since 2000. (Gugliuzzo, "The "Serenissima..." 36).

Besides, psychologically Italians are familiar with this concept because it is quite common in the Italian cities where there is a big river crossing the city. For example the river Arno has created so many problems for Florence and its waters still rise from time to time. The same is valid for the river Tiber which crosses Rome. The local people are worried when the water starts to rise but they do not consider it a menace which cannot be overcome. Otherwise, the Italians could not have lived in those cities for centuries. The attitude of the Venetians is the same. They have accepted that they are forced to live with this problem as part of their daily lives. The upper-class visitors of the city mentioned in the introduction, gradually started directing their attention to other geographical destinations which gave rise to the changing image of Venice in the course of approximately half a century. The arrival of the mass tourism and the cruise ships certainly made this group of people avoid coming to Venice especially in the summer.

The Venetians accept the presence of the Acqua alta with resignation, without complaint. This attitude is shown in the novel by Donna Leon, which we examine in this paper. The protagonist of the novel, Inspector Brunetti considers the rise of the water a natural phenomenon. He is not afraid of it and he does not give utmost importance to this issue. He follows the rules and takes care as much as he can and he goes on with his life in his family and at the office. The two ladies, Flavia and Brett, do not pay a lot of attention to the issue, either. When they hear the sirens, they understand that Acqua alta has started. Nobody in this novel is afraid that the highwaters will cause their death. It does not even cross their minds. Despite, at the end of the novel, Brett is almost killed by the highwaters. Flavia and Inspector Brunetti reach the basement of the palace of the antiquarian just on time and save her life. Otherwise, she would have drowned for sure.

In Donna Leon's novel we observe how Acqua Alta influences the city of Venice:

Because of the ever-increasing rain and the threat of acqua alta, the streets were strangely deserted, even though this was the time when most people would be hurrying home from work or out to do some last-minute shopping before the stores closed. (...) Even the broad top of the Rialto Bridge was strangely deserted, something he could not remember ever having seen before. Many of the stalls were empty, boxes of fruit and vegetables whisked away before closing time, owners escaped from the grinding cold and the rain that continued to pound down. (...) (Leon 104).

Brett has recently been to China as the curator of an archeological exhibition where some objects were illegally copied and exchanged without her noticing it. Brett learns about this operation much later and decides to discuss the issue with the director of the museum. The men attack and beat Brett in Flavia's apartment at the beginning of the novel in order to make her change her mind, and to make sure that she does not tell anyone about it. When this does not work, they kill the director of the museum. At the end of the novel, Brett is taken prisoner by an antiquarian, La Capra, who happens to be the responsible person for the illegal traffic of archeological objects, attacks and the murders which have taken place around Brett. In order to get rid of her, they lock Brett in the basement of La Capra's palace where there is already water at a considerable height due to the approaching Acqua Alta. Brunetti is on his way to the palace of La Capra to look for Brett together with Flavia:

When Brunetti and Flavia reached the bottom of the steps, they saw that the water had risen even higher, and from beyond the door came the roar of the rain as it bucketed down. They picked up the umbrellas and stepped out under the rain, water reaching up towards the tops of their boots. Few people were out, so they got quickly to Rialto, where the water was even deeper. Had it not been for the wooden walkways on their iron stanchions, the water would have flooded into their boots and made progress impossible. (Leon 168).

Brunetti enters the palace alone and La Capra makes his son Salvatore lock him up and go to the basement to kill Brett:

Even in the short time since he had locked the door on l'americana, the water level had risen and now covered the bottom panel. Perhaps she had been in there long enough to have drowned. Even if she had managed to pull herself up into one of the large niches cut into the walls, it would be quick work to drown her. He regretted only that he wouldn't have time to rape her. He had never raped a homosexual before; not a lesbian, at any rate, and he thought it was something he might enjoy. (Leon 176).

Brett manages to kill Salvatore, thereby preventing her own death. She escapes certain death in the face of Acqua Alta, which would have happened if Brunetti had not saved her at the right moment.

### **RESİMLİ DÜNYA BY NEDİM GÜRSEL (2000)**

Let us discuss the same issue in the novel *Resimli Dünya* by Nedim Gürsel whose plot centers around an academic researcher in Venice but the emphasis, in fact, is on the anxiety caused by Acqua Alta. A professor of art history from İstanbul, Kâmil Uzman, goes to Venice to carry out research on Gentile Bellini. Although he has never been there before, through the paintings of Canaletto he becomes very knowledgeable about the Venetian artists and architecture. The novel is about his short stay in Venice which ends with his tragic and violent death. He stays at the studio of one of his colleagues which is equipped with a pump and a wooden separator at the threshold against Acqua Alta. He is introduced to Acqua Alta in a coffee house on Saint Mark's Square:

However, he came back to his senses when the pianist approached the table:

- *Aqua alta* started, it would be better if you would get out of here as

soon as possible. The waters were really rising, not in his dreams.

The San Marco

Square was being covered by the sea.

- Venice will sink one day, called the pianist.
- Yes sir, the pianist responded, and our city will turn into an underwater museum if no action is taken.

(...)

- We're closing now, the pianist said.
- What am I going to do? How can I return home?
- Where are you staying?
- Near Piazzale Roma.
- Walk through *Procuraties* without stepping on the square. Follow the arrow signs. You get to Rialto and then cross the bridge and you arrive at Piazzale Roma. You don't have to worry too much. *Acqua Alta* brings the sea only up to here. (Gürsel 26).

During his stay in Venice, Prof. Uzman is faced with the problem of *Acqua Alta* almost daily. He has no practical knowledge about the daily life in Venice. Following his arrival to the city, he is faced with *Acqua alta* for which he is not prepared at all. He is terribly scared. He cannot sleep. He is almost obsessed with the fear of being drowned by the *Acqua Alta*:

The room is dark, the shutters of both windows are closed. (...) Yes, he is on a ship now. He is listening to the rustle of the sea sheltered in his cabin. What if there is a storm and the ship sinks! What if the water starts to filter in through the windows! So when the *acqua alta* gradually starts, what if the sea water enters, instead of leaking under the wooden separator at the door, shatters the glass windows and breaks the wooden shutters and drowns him defenseless and totally naked lying in his bed. In that case, the the pump in the adjacent chamber would be also useless (...) For some reason he imagines for himself a violent death, an unexpected end. However, there are more beautiful days to live in Venice. (Gürsel 59).

We are given the same image of Kâmil Uzman over and over by the author as if trying to convince the reader about the real danger the Venetians are facing:

The shutters of the studio are tightly closed, even the faintest light does not leak inside. The sound of the canal is not heard, either. Not a motor taxi passing by nor the songs of the gondolier, nothing, but nothing disturbs the silence. Kâmil Uzman lies on his back, with his eyes fixed to the ceiling. (...) A faint sound comes to his ear. At the same time, the bed begins to shake with vague intervals. A uniform, annoying noise seems to come from somewhere very close by. Kâmil Uzman understands that the pump in the adjacent chamber has started functioning. It seems that the water of the canal has overflowed. What if it fills in through the windows! (Gürsel 159-160).

Every day, he spends hours in the library where he meets Lucia who is in charge of the desk. He starts flirting with Lucia but at the same time he finds a prostitute in the street as he is extremely fond of women. It is the carnival period. People are walking on the streets or riding gondolas with masks on their faces. Kâmil Uzman is seriously afraid of the Acqua Alta. At night when he is lying in his bed, he keeps listening to the rustle of the water. He is afraid that he will die because of Acqua Alta. This continuous fear affects his psychology and makes him lose control of his mood and of his behaviour in general. He starts drinking heavily. He cannot think soundly. He feels he is persecuted by the rising water. As a consolation he looks for the prostitute he had met at the beginning of the novel but this time he does not notice that she is accompanied by two men and when they reach the house, because of being heavily drunk, he leaves the door open which results in a catastrophe as the two men beat him to death. Although all through the novel, we observe his terror of being killed by the Acqua alta in the end he is killed not directly by Acqua alta but his death is indirectly caused by it as it influences his psychological balance negatively.

So we observe that the cause of his death has not been what he had feared most:

Death will find Kâmil Uzman at night during the Carnival whereas he had been looking forward to it with enthusiasm. He was wearing a mask himself and he wasn't afraid of the people with Carnival masks on their faces. He made love with the same prostitute which he had met before and she was also wearing a mask. In Venice the Carnival brings death to Kâmil Uzman. (Etensel İldem 5).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed at presenting an image of Venice which has appeared in the XX. Century and is growing continuously. The fundamental problem which has dominated the city for centuries, is the fact that the city is sinking slowly and that people fear that it may end up like Atlantis, Venice is totally aware of what is happening and there are projects trying to stop the city from sinking into the sea. In addition to this grave problem, Acqua Alta has also increased its impact on the city. The city authorities are trying to find a solution to this problem with a project which is not completed yet.

In the year 2019 Venice has faced serious attacks from Acqua Alta, which in 2020 still continue in intervals giving rise to great concern. The two novels we have discussed in this paper present the problem of Acqua Alta.. In Donna Leon's novel apart from the phenomenon of the Acqua alta also an illegal traffic of archeological objects has been dealt with. In Nedim Gursel's novel, apart from the Acqua alta, some ideas about various paintings in the Venetian museums, especially by the members of the Bellini family are presented but as they are irrelevant to our aim, we have put the emphasis on the rising waters.

In our days in which most of the countries in the world are shocked with the news of the Corona virus that recently emerged from China causing the death of many people. In a short period of time the Corona virus has reached Europe. Up to this day it has given rise to innumerable deaths. Unfortunately, Italy is the most affected country in Europe, a situation which caused the cancellation of celebrations, festivals, sports competitions, in short, any type of event which would enable masses of people gathering in the same spot.

Therefore, the Carnival of Venice has also been cancelled. Venice that used to complain eternally about tourists invading the city, has turned into a ghost town which will definitely be catastrophic for the tourism industry and for most of the Venetians. The only advantage has been the water in the canals which has become clear and transparent.

We conclude this paper hoping that in the near future all the problems faced by Venice will be solved and that the eternal city will go on existing with its supernatural and magical beauty and attraction.

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