



**Atf / Citation**

MENGÜ, G. (2022). "Literary Anthropology in General Terms". *Gazi Türkiyat*, 31: 15-21.

**Geliş / Submitted**

06.10.2022

**Kabul / Accepted**

20.12.2022

**DOI**

10.34189/gtd.31.002

## LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY IN GENERAL TERMS

### *Genel Hatlarıyla Edebî Antropoloji*

#### Güven MENGÜ\*

**Abstract**

*Although there are very many different types of definitions for "literature," it is widely accepted that throughout history, the term has been used to refer to creative works of poetry and prose that are differentiated from one another by the intents of their creators and the acknowledged superiority of their aesthetic qualities. Anthropology is the scientific study of people, intending to figure out how we have changed, what makes us unique as a species, and how different people have organized their social lives in different parts of the world and over time. Literary anthropology, as the name implies, investigates two distinct fields of study. The first will be a look at the role that literature plays in society and people's lives, with a focus on social, cultural, and historical contexts. The field of literary anthropology can be thought of as an investigation into the various types of expression that fall under the category of style and into how these categories can be understood to be associated with a historical particularity, a cultural analysis, social, and institutional theory. The merging of literary analysis with anthropological research yields a plethora of information on cultural norms, social practices, and religious convictions. The goal of this descriptive paper is to explain how anthropology and literature could possibly be related.*

**Keywords:** Literature; anthropology; literary anthropology; cultural anthropology

**Öz**

*"Edebiyat" kavramı için pek çok farklı tanım türü olmasına rağmen, tarih boyunca yaygın olarak kabul edilen bu terim, yaratıcıların niyetleri ve estetik niteliklerinin kabul edilen üstünlüğü ile birbirinden ayrılan yaratıcı şiir ve nesir eserlerine atıfta bulunmak için kullanılmıştır. Antropoloji, nasıl değiştiğimizi, bir tür olarak bizi neyin benzersiz kıldığını ve dünyanın farklı yerlerinde ve zaman içinde farklı insanların sosyal yaşamlarını nasıl düzenlediklerini anlamaya çalışan insanların bilimsel çalışmasıdır. Adından da anlaşılacağı gibi edebî antropoloji, iki farklı çalışma alanını araştırır. Birincisi, sosyal, kültürel ve tarihsel bağlamlara odaklanarak edebiyatın toplumda ve insanların yaşamlarında oynadığı role bir bakış şeklindedir. Edebî antropoloji alanı, üslup kategorisine giren çeşitli ifade türlerinin ve bu türlerin tarihsel bir özellik, kültürel bir değerlendirme ve sosyal, kurumsal teori ile ilişkilendirilerek nasıl anlaşılabilirliğinin araştırılması olarak düşünülebilir. Edebî analizin antropolojik araştırmayla birleştirilmesi, kültürel normlar, sosyal uygulamalar ve*

\* Doç. Dr. Ankara Hacı Bayram Veli Üniversitesi, Batı Dilleri ve Edebiyatları Ana Bilim Dalı, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Ana Bilim Dalı, Ankara/TÜRKİYE. guven.mengu@hbu.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0002-7421-0348

*dini inançlar hakkında çok sayıda bilgi sağlar. Bu betimleyici makalenin amacı, antropoloji ve edebiyatın olası bir etkileşiminin nasıl olabileceğini betimlemektir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Edebiyat; antropoloji; edebî antropoloji; kültürel antropoloji

## INTRODUCTION

Before embarking on a discussion of *literary anthropology*, it is crucial to mention the two major components of this study; literature and anthropology. In broad outline, the term literature is often used to refer to a collection of written works, especially creative works of poetry and prose, that stand out for the reader because of the author's objectives and the quality of implementation way they are implemented. Language, country of origin, time period, genre, topic matter, and more may all be used to categorize works of literature (Rexroth 2022). People are able to express their ideas, feelings, dreams, and experiences via the medium of language, which is why literature is considered to be a sort of art. Literature comprises written works that have an aesthetic quality. Throughout the course of history, there have been many various types of literary genres, subjects, themes, and movements, all of which have had an influence on literature, or literature has had an influence on these aspects. When it comes to social, political, cultural, and historical elements of society, literature has a significant amount of impact. The time period in which a literary work is composed is illuminated by the work itself. Human beings have long served as the primary subject of investigation in literary works. Most critics would agree that not all ideas represented in written form belong in the same category as literature. Artistic quality is used to judge the success or failure of individual efforts within various genres. Artistic excellence is harder to describe than to perceive. The writer does not even have to try to get it.

The study of mankind, encompassing its historical beginnings as well as the variety of modern humans, is referred to as anthropology which focuses on understanding people anywhere and at any time. It explores the ways in which people, cultures, and environments have interacted and depended upon one another over time and space, both now and in the distant past before records were kept. The study of all aspects of humankind is the focus of the discipline of anthropology. The history of mankind, the biology of people, communities and civilizations, distinct cultures, and the values that societies hold are all topics that anthropologists investigate. When compared to other academic fields that focus on humankind, such as history, psychology, economics, political science, and sociology, anthropology has a more comprehensive and multifaceted approach. In comparison to these other fields of study, anthropology comprises a far wider variety of subjects and spans a significantly more extended period. As a result of their special, all-encompassing viewpoint, anthropologists can tackle the mysterious concept of human nature. (Haviland 2017: 3, Miller 2017: 2).

## THE CONCEPT OF LITERARY ANTHROPOLOGY

It is well known that literature cannot be considered science, nor can its creator be considered to be a scientist. It may not always provide us with factual information. It is impossible to overlook, however, the fact that it gives an unending supply of information on the culture and the period during which it was composed. Overall, literature is more than just a piece of paper on the interior of which there is no significant significance. People not only read it but also speculate on what authors attempt to convey to us via their writing. The combination of these interpretations and anthropology provides us with a great deal of information on a variety of topics, including history, culture, viewpoints of human beings, psychology, and even relationships. Literary anthropology is a broad term that encompasses not one but two distinct areas of research. The first will be an investigation into the function that literature recreates in everyday life as well as in the individual experience, focusing on specific social, cultural, and historical contexts. The investigation into the meaning of the term "literature" is a component of this study. In this context, literary anthropology can be seen as a study of the different ways people express themselves, which are called genres. It also looks at how each genre can be seen as having a chronological meaning, a cultural meaning, and a social institutionalism that goes along with it. The anthropologist may have a different view or explanation of literature, such as that it is the oral telling of myths orally and sharing of them. Second, literary anthropology is the study of what anthropology is like as an academic field (Rapport 2012).

There are two aspects to the study of literary anthropology. In the first place, there is an emphasis placed on literature in general and the function that it serves both in collective and personal lives. In this way, literary anthropology can be seen as a study of the many ways people can express themselves, as well as how each of these ways can be seen as having its own history, culture, and social institutions. This subfield scrutinizes writers like Chekov, Dickens, and Eliot and how they tried to show reality plainly through social realism literature (Craith & Fournier 2016, as cited in Rapport 2012). With the help of literature, we are even able to discover that indigenous people are not suited to live in different climates and that doing so might make them ill. This interest, which started with the lives of Native Americans, was applied to all human periods to find new information about them. This further investigation gave the field of anthropology a new source. If literary criticism and interpretation cannot help us understand the historical context and the human condition, all we can do is read, feel something while we read, and then put the book down. When literature and anthropology are combined, to give concrete examples, we see that the Middle Ages treated women as alluring and cruel souls because of literature: the Victorians had child labor and angels in the home, the Romantics turned to nature for answers, and the modern world has given up trying to figure out what it all means. No matter how much we could want otherwise, the writers of those eras made it clear to us that everything about human existence was a struggle. The author is not a scientist, but

Lehmann (2013) notes that artistic innovations are based on the author's genuine observation of other humans and recreate features consistent with human nature. Since such literary works and their writers contribute significantly to anthropological understanding as they attempt to portray the reality of the human person with the reciprocal relationship between mind and body and how he or she interacts with the social environment. Thus, we may classify the writers as anthropologists since they shed light on the past. They illustrate the ways that individuals throughout the Middle Ages utilized religion as a tool of power, the expectations to secure a marriage were placed on Victorian women, that World War I impacted the contemporary world, and that postmodernism destructed the metanarratives. To investigate further, when we read, for instance, a Dickens's novel, we can almost smell the stench of the streets and see the shadows cast by the walls, all thanks to the Industrial Revolution. By reading E.M. Forster, one may gain an insight into the oppression of the Indian people at the hands of the English. This work also reveals the perspectives of its readers; for instance, if Fielding had not existed, we could/would have assumed that all English people were harsh to Indians. It is clear that Fielding and George Orwell, the authors of the novels, are humans, and they struggle with feelings and doubts about their actions, as seen in *Shooting an Elephant*. There are times when, like an anthropologist, an author's goal is to represent a culture directly rather than to create fiction. Synge's play is perhaps the most illustrative example of this kind of intent. He picked a remote island where Irish tradition was preserved in order to spread the news. The gender roles and occupations of the Irish people may be inferred from his one-act play, *Riders to the Sea*, as may their religion through the use of symbols like the gray pony and their superstitions about the power of a mother's blessing. Just one play allows us to understand the Irish environment, viewpoint, and tradition. Symbols, allegories, and discussions, like the one with the gray pony, may shed light on the human condition in a work of literature. Since the author takes careful notes and relays them to the reader, we may trust the information they provide. That's why reading a book is the best way to learn about a different time and culture since it does not require any experiments, costly procedures, or scientific findings. In other words, if it did not have that type of power, then neither anthropologists nor literature students would bother to attempt to analyze all these literary works and would instead read them for pleasure (Abramo et al. 2017).

Literary anthropologists think that narratives and theatrical literature, as well as semiotics, are significant cultural artifacts that may enlighten audiences about other societies and ways of life. By way of illustration, consider how cultural habits are shown to function within defined temporal and geographical contexts via the reading of a book or short story. This allows the actual mechanisms to be revealed, regardless of the author's intentions. Class identification, residential architecture, manners, and clothes disclose as much as any anthropological inquiry, making the environment just as significant. Each of these factors adds to our comprehension of culture, which may

be thought of as an aggregation of acquired and physiologically imprinted behaviors shared by the people who live in a particular location. These include a wide range of daily habits, ways of talking to each other, social norms, and taboos. (Al-Gharib 2020: 92-94).

Concerning the limits of literary anthropology, it could be highlighted that literary criticism, interpretation, or literary anthropology, no matter what we want to call these fields of study, tells us almost everything we need to know about the topic at hand. On the other hand, as was said before, it cannot be considered a scientific discipline. It does not provide us with these details once research or accurate analysis has been completed. According to what Reyna (1994: 21) had to say about it, even if there are "many" different interpretations, they are not "infinite." This gives rise to the potential that specific interpretations are more accurate than others, and even though there are "many" interpretations, these are not "infinite" in number. The existence of this fact creates the potential for specific interpretations to be more legitimate than others. A literary work does not necessarily provide us with a fact in every instance since there is more than one interpretation that might be considered legitimate. Even when analyzing the same sign, various people might come to quite different conclusions about what it means, and it is impossible for anybody to conclude that one of these interpretations is incorrect. Because of this, literary anthropology is characterized by the presence of the question "what if?" throughout its entirety. There are both fictional and nonfictional works of literature, but one cannot know the whole truth about anything without experiencing it ourselves or talking to the author. Therefore, we should not forget that in order to analyze a piece of literature properly, we must first read the author's interpretation of the work. Given that observation was rare throughout these times, it is impossible to know for sure if the works in question are based on true events or the author's imagination. In other words, we cannot always assume the findings of literary anthropology to be accurate.

## CONCLUSION

Literature is often seen as one of the most consistent and thought-provoking intellectual partners of anthropology. In their many guises, the two have always been inextricably linked. The most well-known of these is the idea that an anthropologist may also be a writer; this line of thinking often borrows from postmodernism and uses literary approaches to address issues of representation and re-creation in the field. Studying tangible literary acts like reading, writing, performing, sharing, and listening is another important but often overlooked area of study. This can be done through ethnographic fieldwork or anthropological approaches to textual analysis. Finally, there is the vast web of connections that anthropologists have forged with various literary characters and books that have informed and shaped their work and lives. The two areas of research—the first, more conventional method, and the second, literary

turn, which focuses on the fundamental essence of knowledge and representation— can be seen as inextricably intertwined.

Anthropology considers the importance of both literary and other forms of communication to do work at specific historical, social-structural, political, and individual instants when asking what kinds of utterance it should adopt for gaining an understanding of its research topic and disseminating the results of that research. That is to say, anthropologists wonder what sorts of language they should use in order to better understand their study subjects and disseminate their findings. Because it provides insight into the whole complex of the human social state, literary anthropology has been a rising topic of anthropological interest. Included in this category are questions of how anthropology can adequately evidence the subjectivity of reality, the function of story in the human mind, and the dynamics of innovation in group dynamics. It might be argued that literary works should be evaluated in light of the civilizations in which they were originally written.

When all of the relevant instances and materials are considered, it becomes clear that there is an unavoidable connection between anthropology and literature. The reading of literary writings may offer access to ethnographic resources; hence, reading literature can help one gain knowledge about a specific time period, culture, or civilization. The dominant linguistic structure of a society may also be more accurate in a community via the use of literary works of art. Literary and religious literature such as theater, poetry, and the Bible demonstrate the change of language in written works and its reflections in a society in the same way as the examples of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance period do. By moving away from Latin and toward local languages, the whole social, cultural, and historical framework changed, and more people became capable of understanding literature and religion. The contentious problem is, however, that historiography arises from the fact that it is not feasible to write objectively about history in its entirety. It is possible to classify it as a literary art, which belongs to the genre of fiction. Even if works of literature are works of fiction, it is possible to learn something about history and culture through reading them.

Literary critics try to figure out what symbols, settings, characters, and storylines mean because they think that all of these things tell us something important about how time and society have changed. Literary works are helpful instruments in gaining an understanding since every author examines and comments about the moment in which they live. Even though we weren't alive during that time, we can still figure out what people believed and how they acted by looking at what was common during that time. If we have even a little knowledge, we should be able to deduce that the details are incorrect and do not originate from specific culture. Furthermore, we are able to comprehend that such a thing does not exist in Turkish culture. This is because, in addition to the things that a society possesses, the things that it does not possess and the things that they do also form a part of that society's culture. In spite of the

restrictions placed on literary criticism, it is a very useful tool for anthropological analysis. It is for this very reason that the combination of literature and anthropology provides us with a wealth of knowledge on culture, behavior, and belief. Even though it is not generally regarded as a legitimate branch of science, the potential that it offers cannot be disregarded.

In many educational institutions and organizations, literary and cultural anthropology is now recognized as a prominent disciplines in their own right. This has made it possible because, over the course of the last half-century, individual writers of literary works of any type have been weakened in their role as unique producers of meaning. Social anthropology and literature have been changed by both post-structuralist and structuralist ideas. Both try to deconstruct, decenter, and eventually break apart the individual. As a field of study that keeps an ongoing conversation going between ideas, deeds, and texts, "literary anthropology" may now take on a more general and expansive form (Al-Gharib 2020: 91). People often think that literary texts are forms of discourse that should be deconstructed as part of a different anthropological study. Any kind of fiction can be used to learn about traditions, etiquette, and mythology, and the level of quality doesn't matter because they all use literature and anthropology to help them figure out what the story means, and they all believe that the human situation is always represented symbolically. Even if a writer or poet makes up an entire culture, the literary works they make are still connected to and reflect that culture. Even though the work that was produced was inspired by real events, it may have been the product of a mental construction. It wouldn't be wrong to use works of literature to do mental fieldwork and come to a conclusion.

## REFERENCES

- ABRAMO, F.C., GAMBINO, R., & PULVIRENTI, G. (2017). "Cognitive literary Anthropology and Neurohermeneutics. A theoretical Proposal". *Enthymema*, XVIII. Milan.
- AL-GHARIB, M. (2020). "A Convergence between Anthropology and Literature: How Reading, Writing, and Ethnography Intertwine". *International Journal of Applied Linguistics & English Literature*, Australian International Academic Centre PTY.LTD, 9 (5): 91-100.
- CRAITH, M. N. & FOURNIER, L. S. (2016). "Literary Anthropology: The Sub-disciplinary Context". *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures*, Vol. 25, no. 1. Oxford: Berghahn Books, Inc.
- HAVILAND, W.A. & et al. (2017). *Anthropology: The Human Challenge*. Boston: Cengage Learning.
- LEHMANN, J. F. (2013). "Anthropologie". *Literatur und Wissen. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (eds. R. Borgards, H. Neumeyer, N. Pethes, Y. Wübben.). Stuttgart: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 57-63.
- MILLER, B. (2017). *Cultural Anthropology*. Boston: Pearson.
- RAPPORT, N. (2012). "Literary Anthropology". *Oxford Bibliographies Online*, doi: 10.1093/OBO/9780199766567-0067.
- REYNA, S. P. (1994). "Literary Anthropology and the Case Against Science". *Man*, London: Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 29 (3): 555-581.