



A Demand for Narrative: Reading Sabahattin Ali's Novel *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* as a Quest for Identity

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Abstract

Sabahattin Ali's first novel, *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*, published in 1937, is a historically significant text within Turkish literature; it is the first realistic novel about Anatolian life and is a critique of the social system. However, the novel remained incomplete due to Ali's murder in 1948 amid a rising tide of authoritarianism and nationalism that he consistently critiqued. This study examines the novel's demand for narrative identity in the context of its creator's untimely death. The study reveals three obstacles: "the silent language of victimhood," the extreme experience of loneliness, and the finality of the author's death, all of which function as barriers to realizing personal narratives. This exploration is also an attempt at an act of sepulcher, as defined by Paul Ricoeur, which means mourning the author's death by revising the incompleteness of Yusuf's identity. Ali's novel is an example of an ethical mode of authoring that requires giving up authoritative control over real or fictional life stories. Acknowledging the existence of untold stories alongside the potential for new narratives attests to the power of storytelling through the vulnerability of a life story.

Keywords: Turkish literature, Sabahattin Ali, narrative identity, the death of the author, ethical authorship.

Bir Anlatı Talebi: Sabahattin Ali'nin *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* Romanını Bir Kimlik Arayışı Olarak Okumak

Öz

Sabahattin Ali'nin 1937 yılında yayımlanan ilk romanı *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*, Anadolu yaşamına dair ilk gerçekçi roman olması ve toplumsal sistem eleştirisi içermesi bakımından Türk edebiyatında tarihsel öneme sahip bir metindir. Roman, Ali'nin 1948 yılında, sürekli eleştirdiği otoriterlik ve milliyetçilik dalgasının yükseldiği bir dönemde öldürülmesi nedeniyle yarım kalmıştır. Bu çalışma, romanın anlatısal kimlik talebini, yazarın zamansız ölümü bağlamında incelemektedir. Çalışma, hepsi de kişisel anlatıların gerçekleşmesini engelleyen bariyerler olarak işlev gören üç temayı ortaya çıkardı- 'mağduriyetin sessiz dili', bir uç deneyim olarak yalnızlık ve yazarın ölümünün kesinliği- Bu çalışma, aynı zamanda Paul Ricoeur'in tanımladığı şekliyle bir mezara koyma eylemidir. Yusuf'un kimliğinin tamamlanmamış olmasını, yazarın gerçek ya da kurgusal yaşam öyküleri üzerindeki otoriter kontrolünden vazgeçmesini gerektiren etik bir yazarlık tarzının örneği olarak gözden geçirerek yazarın ölümünün yasını tutma girişimidir. Yeni anlatılar için potansiyelin yanı sıra anlatılmamış hikâyelerin varlığını da kabul eden çalışma, bir hayat hikâyesinin kırılabilirliği üzerinden hikâye anlatıcılığının gücünü olumluyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk edebiyatı, Sabahattin Ali, anlatısal kimlik, yazarın ölümü, etik yazarlık.

INTRODUCTION

Sabahattin Ali was born in Bulgaria in 1907 and died in 1948. He wrote three novels as well as short stories and poems. His friend Niyazi Berkes described him as a man with two selves: one a boisterous, loquacious child in the body of an old man, and the other an intense philosopher (Bezirci, 2007, p. 53). Unsurprisingly, such a character was also loud and scathing in his critique of Turkey's governmental authorities and official institutions during the 1930s and 1940s. After the establishment of the new secular republic through reforms during the 1920s, under the leadership of the nation's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the attention of the single-party state turned towards ideological concerns. During the 1930s, Turkey became more nationalist and authoritarian, and the nation was defined through territorial, religious, and ethno-religious boundaries (Çağaptay, 2002). In other words, in the 1930s, Turkey started forming a national identity. Another aspect of the 1930s was Turkey's Westernization. Tanıl Bora (2017, p. 95) has defined the republic's intellectuals in that period as Orientalists who identified as modern Western people of Turkish identity. They had contempt for people and in Anatolian villages and towns or felt embarrassed for them. Sabahattin Ali had already lived in Germany for several years. For Bora, he exemplifies the Turkish intellectual who recognized the distance between the perceived West and the actual West, and Bora defines what Ali felt as "*melancholy loneliness*" (2017, p. 95).

The profound loneliness he experienced seemed to intensify over time. He was incarcerated twice, in 1932 and 1948, and the government banned his books and prosecuted him. Additionally, he became the target of a group of Turkish nationalists known as *Turanists*. In 1948, he decided to leave Turkey to escape this hostile environment. Several months later, his body was discovered in a field near the Bulgarian border, and a smuggler named Ali Ertekin confessed to killing him out of "national feelings" (Bezirci, 2007, p. 71). Ertekin was released the same year under an amnesty law. In the 1970s, Lieutenant Colonel Talat Turhan and his friend Adnan Çakmak revealed to journalists that Turkey's intelligence organization, the National Security Service, had detained Sabahattin Ali until 1965. He was allegedly killed during torture at the police headquarters, and his body was covertly disposed of. When the body was found, Ertekin claimed responsibility and was released soon after (Bezirci, 2007, p. 74). However, the location of Sabahattin Ali's body remains unknown, which evokes Ricoeur's concept of the act of sepulcher:

History, we said then, has the responsibility for the dead of the past, whose heirs we are. The historical operation in its entirety can then be considered an act of sepulcher. Not a place, a cemetery, a simple depository of bones, but an act of repeated entombment. This scriptural sepulcher extends the work of memory and the work of mourning on the plane of history. The work of mourning definitively separates the past from the present and makes way for the future. (Ricoeur, 2002, p. 499)

Sabahattin Ali's death at the age of 41 has become a part of Turkey's history of political violence. Leaving no body to bury, nor a tombstone nor epigraph, his death obliges the living to properly bury the author. This responsibility for the dead does not belong to historians alone; the debt to yesterday's dead belongs to the living. If they choose to do so, readers and interpreters have the ability to assume the debt themselves. With this responsibility in mind, the following interpretation of his first novel, *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* (Yusuf of Kuyucak), is primarily an attempt at an *act of sepulcher*, an attempt to mourn the author's passing and the potential stories that were lost because he has been murdered. According to Ricoeur, the path of proper burial is nothing other than the path of mourning:

Sepulcher, indeed, is not only a place set apart in our cities, the place we call a cemetery and in which we deposit the remains of the living who return to dust. It is an act, the act of burying. This gesture is not punctual; it is not limited to the moment of burial. The sepulcher remains because the gesture of

burying remains; its path is the very path of mourning that transforms the physical absence of the lost object into an inner presence. The sepulcher as the material place thus becomes the enduring mark of mourning, the memory-aid of the act of sepulcher. (Ricoeur, 2002, 366)

The lost object can be anything that is lost to history, such as a body or unwritten books and unfinished narratives. *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* is such a narrative, as it is well known that Ali intended to write further installments of the novel. Given these absent books, the path of mourning involves acts that transform loss into presence. To accomplish this transformation, this interpretation of *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* focuses on the demand for the act of sepulcher, since any such act must answer the absent object or person who demands to be buried and mourned.

The demand of the dead correlates with another part of Ricoeur's philosophy: life's demand for narration. According to Ricoeur, even before becoming a story or history, life demands to be narrated (2003, p. 29). In this sense, narration is an important part of the act of sepulcher. Life stories act as memorials and memory devices that provide lasting traces whether they are fictional, biographical, or historical. The conceptual framework of narrative identity bridges the gap between the act of sepulcher, the demand of the dead, and the act of narration, the demand of life. However, to meet this demand and move along the path of mourning, interpretation must recognize the obstacles to narrating one's identity. Some obstacles are certainly insurmountable, like the sudden interruption of a text by the death of its author. This is why stories like *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* remain incomplete. Ultimately, this recognition of the vulnerability of narration should become an ethical stance that recognizes the demand alongside its obstacles. Some stories go unheard, are not shared, and remain incomplete. Therefore, the act of sepulcher, the path to mourning, takes detours into the frustrations, obstacles, and impossibilities of the demand for narrative. All these absences and limits provide a reading of *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* as an expression of the frustrations and limitations of the demand for narrative. My contention is that, to move along the path of mourning and turn the absent object into a presence, the novel's incompleteness can be transformed into an ethical stance that Ali himself demonstrated through his relationship with his main character, Yusuf.

Interpreting the novel through the framework of the expression of the demand for narrative identity reveals three themes. The first comes from Ferda Zambak's critique of Berna Moran's interpretation of Yusuf as a noble, natural man formulated by Rousseau. In Zambak's reading, the novel expresses "*the silent language of victimhood*" (Zambak, 2017, p. 375). According to her, silence is more apparent in the novel's female characters, but this silence also extends to males. The silence of the novel's characters leads to delayed action and tragic consequences. It has been argued that silence is one reason Yusuf cannot complete his search for identity. The second theme is the direct continuation of the first. A small but significant part of the novel is interpreted using Hannah Arendt's concept of loneliness, which she distinguishes from solitude and isolation. In this part of the novel, Yusuf experiences an almost existential crisis in which he comes very close to the extreme experience of loneliness, as Arendt describes it (1976, p. 477). This extreme loneliness would have been another end to the act of narration, where the self cannot be heard by others and themselves. The third theme focuses on *the death of the author* using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the ethical subject, which he privileges over the subject who narrates. The most relevant aspect of Bakhtin's treatment of narrative identity is that he refuses to accept that a life story can be finalized through narrative. To become ethical subjects, human beings must become authorless and reject authorial impulses to give unity and a sense of finality to life. Ali wrote in the ethical mode that Bakhtin envisioned. This allows the incompleteness of Yusuf's identity in terms of aesthetic unity to emerge intact through an ethical mode of listening and authoring that recognizes the impossibility of finalizing a life story, both fictional and real. Considering Ali as an author who wrote in the ethical mode also provides a perspective that considers both the author's actual death and

the ethical mode in which he wrote *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* as part of the same goal. This research aims to address the author's death by incorporating it into the analysis of the novel. The loss of both individuals and literary works can be mourned through an interpretation of the novel that seeks new meanings. Thus, the final part of the study focuses on the novel's last remarks, which promise new beginnings and a potential future.

This part of the paper will provide an overview of the novel, focusing on parts that are relevant to this paper's argument. A man named Yusuf from the village of Kuyucak shared his story with Ali, whom he met in prison, providing inspiration for the novel's titular character. In this sense, the novel is a fictional life story whose origin is nonetheless connected to reality. The story begins with a murder scene in the Aegean region of Anatolia, in the village of Kuyucak. The year is 1903, a period in which the Ottoman Empire was in decline. The district governor, Salâhhatin Bey, and military law enforcement officers find Yusuf, a wounded, strangely calm boy, next to the dead bodies of his parents, murdered in their beds by bandits.

Salâhhatin Bey, who, with his wife Şahinde Hanım, has a daughter named Muazzez, adopts the brave, strange, and wounded boy. Yusuf and Muazzez grow up together in Edremit. Yusuf is silent and aloof and refuses to go to school. He does not understand the purpose of education or the people in the town; he only feels love for Muazzez. He belongs to the world of olive trees and seasonal farm workers and is more comfortable speaking the language of nature and laborers.

One day, a young man called Şakir, drunk and rude, flirts with Muazzez. This behavior angers Yusuf, her protector, and he beats Şakir. However, Şakir is the son of Hilmi Bey, a wealthy and influential man in town. Unknowingly, Yusuf sets off a chain of events that leads to disaster. Hilmi Bey tricks Salâhhatin Bey into gambling, putting him in debt, and forcing him to marry Şakir to Muazzez. Yusuf meets two women, a mother and her daughter, Kübra, who used to work for Hilmi Bey. Şakir sexually assaults Kübra with his father's help. Despite Şahinde's disapproval, Yusuf gives Kübra and her mother shelter. Later, Kübra reveals her story, which makes clear that Muazzez's marriage to Şakir would be a disaster.

To repay and get rid of his stepfather's gambling debt, Yusuf offers Muazzez to his wealthy friend Ali and requests a bride price. He then pays his stepfather's debts and leaves town, struggling with feelings of shame, anger, and regret. Realizing his love for Muazzez and her love for him, he returns but faces a major obstacle: he has already sold her into marriage for money.

Hilmi and Şakir murder Ali during his wedding and use their influence to allow the killer to go free. They pursue Muazzez again, but Yusuf elopes with her, and they marry in a distant village. Salâhhatin Bey discovers their marriage and asks them to return, which they do. Yusuf is given a desk job in his father's office, which does not suit his temperament. Later, Salâhhatin Bey passes away. The new district governor, swayed by Hilmi and Şakir, gives Yusuf a job as a cavalry tax collector, requiring him to travel on horseback to remote villages. This allows Hilmi and Şakir to continue mistreating Muazzez during their alcohol-fueled parties.

One day, after he falls dangerously ill on the road, Yusuf returns to town and catches Hilmi and Şakir mistreating Muazzez. With Şahinde's cooperation, Hilmi Bey, Şakir, and other men have managed to get Muazzez drunk. Seeing this, Yusuf shoots them all, taking Muazzez away from the town. Some distance away, Yusuf realizes that Muazzez has been wounded. Shocked, cold, and desperate under snowy skies, Yusuf lets Muazzez rest. Several hours later, she dies. Yusuf buries her in the cold ground and rides away from the town. The novel ends with the promise of a new life: *"Even for all the ruins, and for all the sorrow inside him, he did not want to hang his head down. He would single-handedly carry the weight of his mourning without saying a word, and he would walk towards a new life"* (Ali, 1984, p. 221).

Three Obstacles to the Demand for Narrative Identity in *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*

According to Paul Ricoeur, life and narrative are fundamentally related. They may initially seem unrelated because stories are recounted and not lived, whereas life is lived and not recounted. To the former argument, Ricoeur notes that *the world of the text* and *the world of the reader* intersect through reading. The reader appropriates and unfolds a text, which contains events, characters, and actions. As readers unfold and appropriate this world, it transfigures their experience. As the reader follows the story, they live it "*in the mode of the imaginary*" (Ricoeur, 2003, p.27). Ricoeur answers the latter argument that life is lived and not recounted by stressing the "*pre-narrative capacity of what we call life*" (Ricoeur, 2003, p.27). A life that is not examined, recounted, or interpreted is merely biological. However, even in this nascent state, life is more than that. Ricoeur considers life "*an activity and a passion in search of a narrative*" (2003, p.27). He argues that, instead of merely considering life through the mediation of literature, it is more important to realize that life itself carries within it "*genuine demand for narrative*" (2003, p.29). Recognizing the demand for narrative requires acknowledging "*stories that have not yet been told, stories that demand to be told*" (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 30). The fundamental relationship between life and narrative consists of both told and untold stories.

From this double analysis, it follows that fiction, particularly narrative fiction, is an irreducible dimension of self-understanding. If it is true that fiction is only completed in life and that life can be understood only through the stories that we tell about it, then an examined life, in the sense of the word borrowed from Socrates, is a life recounted. (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 30-31)

Recasting Socrates' maxim about the examined life as the only one worth living, Ricoeur emphasizes that any examination of life finds its initial motivation in the demand for narration. Narrative fiction and the life stories of human beings are entangled. From this entanglement, Ricoeur derives a conception of subjectivity based on *narrative identity*. Neither a series of events fragmented beyond any possible configuration nor an unchanging substance, narrative identity is the quest to become the narrator of our life stories. Ricoeur notes that narrative identity does not mean becoming the author of our stories (Ricoeur, 2003). 32). Humans can narrate stories, but they cannot fully control them. There is a difference between life and fiction: fiction can be authored, but life cannot. However, from culture, literary traditions, and characters in stories that are important to us, "*we attempt to obtain a narrative understanding of ourselves, the only kind that escapes the apparent choice between sheer change and absolute identity. Between the two lies narrative identity*" (Ricoeur, 2003, p. 33). Ricoeur's narrative identity offers a framework for conceptualizing subjectivity that is not shattered beyond unity, forever beyond being recounted as a story, nor is it fixed or finalized forever beyond change or transfiguration, unchanging and ahistorical.

Neither a finalized novel nor a structureless sequence of events, life itself is search for narrative. Human life demands narrativization. This demand links the investigation to Moran's interpretation of Yusuf's story as a quest for identity (2001). In turn, Yusuf's search for identity opens a path towards reading *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* as offering help in recounting our own life stories and understanding our *selves*, which are already entangled with Yusuf and the stories of others, dead or alive, fictional or real. This entanglement makes the idea of *untold stories* not only acceptable, but also indispensable for explicating the quest for identity in the novel.

It is worth noting that these three themes are part of the novel's reception (Mutlu, 2022). These three obstacles frustrate *the demand for narrative identity in untold stories*. On the other hand, an ethical stance emerges out of these obstacles when the demand for narrative and mourning are considered alongside them. Demonstrating that Ali wrote from this ethical stance creates the possibility of transforming the absence of the author, his body, and the rest of the story into a presence. It is only

appropriate that this presence be an action, an ethical mode of authoring, and thus related to ethics. As such, it is ultimately related to the act of sepulcher, the duty of the living to the dead.

The First Obstacle: The Silent Language of Victimhood

Having a narrative identity implies that one can become the narrator of one's life. However, in the quest to narrate the identity of the mature self, not everyone is equal. In the novel, the demand for narration can first be heard in the silence of victims who never had the chance to tell their stories. Opposing Moran's view that Yusuf is a noble human, Zambak (2017) considers Yusuf, Muazzez, and Kübra as victims who are unable to express their emotions and expectations and the novel conveys "the silent language of victimhood" (p. 375).

Silence may contain the helplessness that women are made to feel or the burning rage of a defeated young man, such as Yusuf. It may also result from traumatic memory when the inability to recall or make sense of past events frustrates the demand for narratives. Nevertheless, even if victims are forced to remain silent, listening to others is always possible. Listening may initiate a dialog through which the voice of the other can overcome silence, and the other's story can still be heard. Here, listeners are responsible because they have a greater capacity to act. Focusing on listening rather than narration, Alfaro Altamirano (2023) discusses how Ricoeur modifies Socrates' maxim of the examined life into a narrated life. Narrative identity requires humans to become narrators of life stories. According to Alfaro Altamirano, human beings are already listeners and know how to follow a story even before they become narrators. Although becoming narrators of our own lives is a worthy quest, it is equally important to become "good readers or listeners of the stories that surround us" (Altamirano, 2023, p. 421).

In this mode of listening to the "silent language of victimhood," the stories of Yusuf, Kübra, and Muazzez are heard. Limitations caused by gender, history, or culture may curtail victims' ability to tell their stories while simultaneously granting a sense of responsibility to the reader. Patient, calm, and compassionate listeners and readers of stories who are aware of the silences common to human relations are at least as necessary as brave, truthful narrators. Like the old cliché, silences sometimes contain more than words. This is particularly the case with *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*, where the characters' untold stories and their silence about themselves and each other shape the narrative. Yusuf has not confessed his love to himself or Muazzez, so he feels he must marry her to his friend Ali. Muazzez cannot reveal what happens to her when he is away from home. This allows Hilmi and Şakir to continue to abuse her. Words are denied to her, as shame and fear prevent her from revealing her suffering. Yusuf suspects what is happening and asks pointed questions. In tears, Muazzez cannot answer. Yusuf wants to stay and finally overcome their silence, yet he cannot bear to know her story. Therefore, he cannot listen to her and silences her: "Hush, Muazzez, I will come back sooner!" (Ali, 1984, p. 209). He has been forced to keep his emotions silent; therefore, he fears the barely contained emotion in Muazzez's silence. He is ashamed of the story that Muazzez cannot tell and thus forces the same silence on her. In the novel, even history is silent, as during the Balkan Wars, the soldiers "have left in silence, and those who survived have come back in silence" (Ali, 1984, p. 160).

The novel teaches us that not everyone is capable of narration; there are gaps and silences in the stories of others. It is difficult and time-consuming to become an attentive listener of stories, and it is still more challenging to understand the dormant meaning in silence. By allowing us to become aware of the untold, the novel teaches us to pay attention to the other's silence and entreats us to persist in the uncomfortable silence of those who are not yet ready to talk, who are unwilling to be vulnerable, who are never allowed to speak their mind, or who are simply too traumatized to put their fractured stories into words. The quest for identity involves as much listening and reading as narration. Even in the

barely spoken emotions of a victim trying to emerge from silence, a story unfolds. This makes it more appropriate to speak of potential stories as an expected condition of life's demand for narratives.

The Second Obstacle: Loneliness

It can now be argued that silence, which hangs above all the characters of the novel like an atmosphere, can be a breeding ground for loneliness. After demonstrating this relationship between silence and loneliness, Arendt's conceptual framework, which distinguishes abandonment from isolation and solitude, is employed to return to Yusuf's story.

In the final pages of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1976), Arendt investigates loneliness by distinguishing it from isolation and solitude. Isolation is a historical form of control that has long affected human communities, especially in tyrannical societies. In tyrannical forms of government, the productive capacity of human populations is often left intact, but they are banished from the political sphere. For instance, craftsmanship and art require a degree of isolation. As such, isolation concerns segregating public and private life. A totalitarian government, as a form of tyranny, starts the same way but does not stop there. After isolating human beings, it destroys private lives, as well, leading to what Arendt calls loneliness: *"the experience of not belonging to the world at all"* (1976, p. 475). Another distinction must be made to understand loneliness. In contrast to isolation and loneliness, solitude is precisely where the private life of a human flourishes. Arendt argues that nearly all thinking is done in solitude. However, solitude requires one to be alone, whereas loneliness hurts the most in the company of others.

Isolation and solitude may lead to loneliness. Isolation may do so when human lives are reduced to sheer labor, as in slavery. Solitude may turn to loneliness *"when all by myself I am deserted by my own self"* (Arendt, 1976, p. 476). When people are reluctant—out of fear or resentment—to speak, write, and share the products of their thinking or are forced into silence because institutions do not hear their life stories, they may even lose the comfort of their own company. Their aloneness may turn into loneliness if they do not return from solitude. All of these distinctions demonstrate that loneliness appears as an extreme, painful, and degrading experience in Arendt's thought:

What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one's own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals. In this situation, man loses trust in himself as the partner of his thoughts and that elementary confidence in the world which is necessary to make experiences at all. Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time. (Arendt, 1976, p. 477)

It is possible to read Arendt's concept of loneliness as another obstacle in the quest to meet the demands of untold stories. Without the trust needed to become vulnerable to another, and without even the ability to recall and recount one's painful experiences, potential stories become impossible rather than unacceptable. Thus, recognizing untold stories becomes even more critical. In loneliness, the silence between human beings and that which institutions perpetuate starts to permeate humans' inner lives. Arendt's analogy regarding the destruction of all meaningful connections between humans and their worlds is that of deserts and sandstorms. Life is diminished to the point where only the individual is left, separate and small as specks of dust, pressed together in billions; nourishment for what is alive and meaningful is scarce. What is so alarming about loneliness in this sense of abandoning the world and others is that it seems to threaten the pre-narrative capacity of life and, thus, any possible narrative identity. Arendt's silent, lonely desert appears to be the bones of civilization that the storms of history have ground to dust. However, Arendt's analogy of the desert does not mark the end of history or storytelling. She argues that a promise remains to be made and that we are capable of doing so even under this dire global threat of loneliness. This promise is addressed at the end of this study.

The relationship between Arendt's sense of loneliness and *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* must be clarified. There is a point in *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* when Yusuf comes close to loneliness due to abandonment. The third chapter of the book's first half begins with Yusuf leaving the town on a rainy night. He has paid off his stepfather's gambling debts with the money he took from Ali by promising Muazzez to him in marriage. Sabahattin Ali does not say this, but readers assume that Yusuf feels angry, ashamed, frustrated, and other emotions born out of "selling" someone he loves and losing Muazzez. In these two pages, Sabahattin Ali describes an identity crisis that revolves around loneliness as abandonment. This short event is read closely to make this argument; it consists of three moments.

First moment: Yusuf begins to have a phenomenologically described experience in which the relationship between the self and the world is embodied:

It was as if, at that moment, there was nothing in nature that stood by itself. Yusuf thought he was bonded with this immense and monolithic night and trembled with fear. His wet hands traveled across his face. Raindrops fell on his cheeks from his eyelashes. The movements made him conscious of being bound to nowhere. Slowly, he began to feel isolated and distant from his surroundings. Just a moment later, he was assailed by a feeling of loneliness, completely opposite to the moment before. When he looked around, he felt that the trees, clouds, and river were quickly drifting away from him. (Ali, 1984, p. 108)

Being one with nature as well as one's own body recalls Rousseau's account of *living in the present*. After an accident that concussed him, Rousseau enjoyed a moment devoid of anything that identified him as himself. He believed this resembled how natural men were supposed to experience their world (Damrosch, 2010, p. 242). This is another argument against identifying Yusuf as a natural man; he does not enjoy this experience. He is fearful of nature's anonymity, as identity dissolves into an unidentifiable existence. He is bound to everything; having no *body* that feels separated from nature, he is lost to himself. However, with small movements of his hands and sensations, he starts to feel conscious of being bound to nothing at all. This, in turn, makes him feel separate and distant from everything. From this swirl of affect emerges a feeling of loneliness that shakes him to his core. Even nature recedes from the horizon of his world.

Second moment: The next moment begins when, in a bodily movement that emerges from immense emotions, he puts his hands on the bark of a tree behind him:

With both hands, he hugged the bark of the tree behind him. His fingers probed the cold wounds on the bark. He immediately withdrew his hands and brought them to his chest. He believed that inside his chest, there were wounds similar to those on this centuries-old tree's bark, and he felt a fire rose to his throat. Oh God, how lonely he was... (Ali, 1984, p. 108)

What could this "fire" mean? It is the irruption of the past in the present, the same fire burns in Yusuf at the start of the novel, when he witnesses his parents' deaths as a child. Seeing Yusuf, Salâhhatin Bey feels nervous and hesitant: "Because it is not known what kind of a fire burns behind those dry and steady eyes; what boils inside that chest slowly rising and falling" (Ali, 1984, p. 26). Only Yusuf can express what fire means in speech, and only his words can tell his story. The fragmented memory returns but bypasses words; instead, it returns as a fire, which is never attempted to be told, interpreted, or grasped throughout the novel. This may be why Ali uses the metaphor of fire and does not elaborate further.

Yusuf realizes something even without words. The wounds that a tree gathers throughout its life by struggling against weather, sickness, and other animals, such as humans, are recorded on its body. These wounds do not heal like wounds on our body; we stitch the skin together when possible. Trees cover these wounds in callouses, circumscribe them, and leave the site of damage open and visible. A

branch that is torn off is not replaced, yet the place it inhabits does not completely disappear. This makes it possible for Yusuf to feel the tree's wounds through his sense of touch. Like the tree, Yusuf has wounds in his very being that have not yet healed. The fire burns the tree and leaves marks for all to see, a history written on bark "in the language of trees," which Yusuf understands. Although Yusuf begins to interpret his life story, his feelings deny him the words to express them. The emotion becomes his story: he feels that he has always been lonely, ever since he could remember. Loneliness engulfs him, leading to the next moment.

Third moment: The final moment is when Yusuf's loneliness becomes extreme and simultaneously a choice. Here, certainty and doubt struggle in his mind:

Regardless of the direction in which he sent his thoughts, he met no one. He was so convinced that there was not a single person who cared for him at this moment, and in this great world, so, with a painful bravado, he also found no one worth caring for, yet he felt sad and could not understand why. Was there truly no one who cared for him, and could he be this much right to care for no one, thinking that he was lonely? This possibility calmed his nerves slightly. He moved away from the tree; after he took a deep breath, he started walking back to the town. (Ali, 1984, p. 82)

Through these intense emotions, Yusuf is pushed to the verge of loneliness, following Arendt's formulation. If everyone abandoned Yusuf, why would he care about anyone else? Why should someone care about others if others do not do the same? With this bitter display of childish rebellion, he judges others unworthy of care. However, this judgement makes Yusuf unhappy, and he cannot understand why he feels sad over his judgement. Why should *he* feel sad when others are at fault? This unreasonable sadness leads to another thought that allows Yusuf to take a step back from the precipice. Is there no one who cares for him? Would it be right for him to turn away from everyone? This question is sufficient for Yusuf to return to the town and to a life lived with others.

These three moments chart Yusuf's trajectory as he veers close to loneliness, only to turn back at the last moment. There is no story unless one cares enough about others to return and tell it. Loneliness at its most extreme is not being abandoned by the other; it is abandoning the other and the world that becomes worth inhabiting for the sake of the other. Ali prevents Yusuf from experiencing this fate by casting doubt on a conviction rooted in feelings of abandonment. Through this intervention, the story of life remains possible. In other words, the demand for untold stories to become narratives can also be heard in a life lived despite abandonment. It can be heard in the way humans endure the loss of loved ones for the sake of another who deserves to be cared for. However, narrative identity is almost impossible in the extreme experience of loneliness to which Yusuf never succumbs.

The Third Obstacle: The Death of the Author

Kuyucaklı Yusuf is haunted by untold stories. When those who interpret or criticize the novel recount it, Ali's intention to write more books and continue Yusuf's story inevitably arises. Berna Moran and several others have addressed these unwritten books, which would probably have completed Yusuf's story. Here, another parallel between life and narrative emerges: the death of the author at the end of the narrative. The novel's narrative, especially in terms of Yusuf's identity, remains incomplete *because* the novel's author is dead. However, the death of the author is not only related to Ali's own life, which was cut short at the age of 41 because of political violence. Another sense of the death of the author presents an opportunity rather than an obstacle that disappoints the demand for narrative.

Bakhtin argues for an authorless life story in this sense. Like Ricoeur, Bakhtin also believes that life and narratives are similar. However, the authorial, aestheticizing impulse creates a false sense of unity. The illusionary framing act of authoring a life story must be resisted in favor of a story that can never be completed, or "consummated," in Bakhtin's words. This is because the lives of human beings

are thoroughly ethical, and the ethical moment is when narrative identity (who one *is*) and obligation (what *ought* to be done) come into conflict within the self and exclude each other (Erdinast-Vulcan, 2008). This conflict describes Yusuf when he is under the tree and is obligated to save Muazzez and the family's honor by giving her away. His act directly opposes who he is, which is why he experiences a crisis in which he loses himself, becomes involved in an affective relationship with a tree, and nearly abandons his world and other people. Although Yusuf does not have a narrative identity through which he knows himself, he is still able to feel ethical conflict within himself. Bakhtin argues that, in this sense, becoming ethical means recognizing the vulnerability and contingency of narrative identities. There must be a shift from an aesthetic mode of authoring to an ethical mode of authoring because human lives are also "*inescapably ethical*" (Erdinast-Vulcan, 2008, p. 12). In this sense, like a narrative, human life becomes ethical in the absence of authorial tendencies to consummate a story. Humans and authors, when they abandon their pretensions of omniscience, become more responsive to each other; they become better listeners rather than better authors. They also become more responsible; they realize that without caring for others, there is no world or self, no story, merely the desert of loneliness.

The author's death is not only related to unwritten books. In *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*, Sabahattin Ali writes in an ethical mode through which he resists and stops the authorial instinct to consummate his character. The constraints of narrative ability are evident in the blaze that gleams in Yusuf's eyes when he was a child as well as in the fire that consumes the adult beneath the tree. Sabahattin Ali, through Salâhhatin Bey's eyes, sees a fire beyond knowledge, beyond reason. Therefore, he chooses to put what burns in Yusuf beyond the narrative; it is unknown. Fethi Naci mentions Ali's almost fatherly love for Yusuf, and he also praises him for his "*authorly rigor*" (2007, p. 235); he never allows his love to cross a line that would be untrue to his Yusuf's character. As Mutlu (2022) notes, Naci's critique of the novel is distinct. While others have argued that the other characters' psychology is lacking, in Naci's view, Ali never intervenes in his character's choices. Rather, he considered them to be entirely outside himself; he allowed them their independence. However, when necessary, he never hesitated to help them (Mutlu, 2022, p. 93).

The demand for narrative cannot be denied; it is part of our culture and history. On the other hand, the contingency and tragedy of narrative inform an ethical life. Sabahattin Ali's authoring of his characters strikes this *ethical distance*. He allows them to become independent, yet he never retreats so far that he cannot help them. This is how, as human beings, our relationship with others must be constructed—over a distance that should be recognized but remains close enough to reach out. Regarding our own life stories, this appropriate distance becomes a recognition of the entanglement of life with that of others: fictional and real characters, novels, histories, and even trees and fires. Through this reading, it becomes possible to consider Ali's death as only one instance in which the stories remain incomplete. Even as a living author, Ali recognized that a life story cannot be finished, that no author can and should attempt to know everything about the other, and that some stories remain untold. However, this recognition should never be a reason to stop caring for others or to stop listening to and narrating others' stories when they cannot.

CONCLUSION

This interpretation of *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* through the obstacles of silence, loneliness, and the death of the author was an attempt at *an act of sepulcher*. The death of the author means not only the end of the narrative, but also a challenging step in human life through which the self finds opportunities for growth. Ali's ethical mode of authoring is a model for becoming mature selves who can accept the vulnerability of narratives alongside the demand for them. This means living with the absence of unwritten books while completing the novel in other readings and interpretations. This is how we never stop *the act of sepulcher* for Ali and his unfinished novel: without giving up the attempt to complete

Kuyucaklı Yusuf in yet-unwritten books, academic papers, and in the world of potential future readers by accepting that it will never be complete, just as how a life story—full of contradictions and vulnerable to accidents, luck, or tragedy—can never be framed completely.

By expressing the silent language of victimhood through his narrative, Ali respects the vulnerability of narration. That is how he answers the demand for narrative even though it can never be met completely. When loneliness becomes a possibility for Yusuf, Ali helps his character by questioning his emotions and decisions; he does not provide easy answers or solutions but also cares for *others*, especially Yusuf. The quest for narrative identity remains an ordeal, a struggle, and often an impossibility, but an inevitability, as well. By choice or because of tragedy, the demand for narrative identity may not be heard. However, even in the absence of a listener or narrator, the ethical moment makes singular, irreplaceable subjects of all human beings.

Thus, despite the limits and obstacles that frustrate the demand for narrative identity, Yusuf feels real and alive. The fire that burned in him burst out of any conclusion, consummation, or unity. At the end of *Madonna with a Fur Coat*, Ali's third and last novel, the unnamed narrator, after reading Raif Efendi's life story, feels that even after death, Raif Efendi lives on, that he is truly alive, more than anyone he has known. Similarly, at the end of the novel, Yusuf enters our lives and continues to burn alive, more so than most people, with the same fire that Salâhhatin Bey recognizes in the boy's eyes at the beginning of the novel, the same fire that burns Yusuf from within under the tree.

The story may seem finished on the final page of the novel. Yusuf flees Edremit as a murderer, Muazzez is dead, and, finally, the author is dead. However, even the end, there is a promise in *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*. Ali writes that Yusuf walks towards a new life. What would this new life look like? We will never know; the promise remains unkept. It is up to the reader and the inheritors of Ali's novels to fulfill the promise of a new life. One can promise to change and become someone else in the future; it is also possible to revise the past through the act of the sepulcher and the work of mourning, which open the path towards the future yet again. The promise of a new life is also given to *the demand for narrative identity in untold stories*, which grants the reader the responsibility of realizing that promise in their own lives. This is the promise of a new life for Yusuf and his story, a new life for Sabahattin Ali and his irreplaceable loss, and, in the end, maybe a new story for the reader: a new beginning, a new history for all the untold stories, unburied bodies, political assassinations, failures of hearing, and the wounds of memory. After her predictions about a world abandoned by human beings and a reminder that the threat of loneliness will likely remain with humankind, just as tyranny did, Arendt argues that even loneliness is not an end; rather, every end is also a beginning. Every new life story carries within it the potential to begin something new, a narrative identity that is singular and irreplaceable. Even after silence, loneliness, and the death of the author, the promise of a new story persists. The end of *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* never coincides with the death of the author; it remains open as a promise for *us* to keep. Identifying and becoming *us* is another story.

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