

## *A Midlife Dream: Bodily and Spiritual Integrity\**

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### Abstract

Through centuries, the patriarchal construction of women's bodies as disobedient, uncontrollable and as an eternal source of disruption to the social order has formed the misogynist system that silences women's voices and ignores their bodily experiences. Captivated in that system, women have been estranged from their bodies and from their sexualities, and in time, they acquire a split identity and self-understanding as they are merely considered silent and passive objects of male desire. Nevertheless, believing that the female body is an important site of struggle and resistance against the patriarchal structures, a medium through which a woman can articulate her repressed and ignored desire, Erendiz Atasü depicts independent female characters that experience their sexuality as an expression of power. Based on those issues and the theories of de(con)structing the phallogocentric discourses, this study analyzes one of Atasü's most sexually explicit works, *A Midlife Dream*, to unveil and question the relationship between body and sexuality as well as proving that spiritual and sexual integrity is obtained through full body awareness.

**Keywords:** bodily and spiritual integrity, female body, female sexuality, de(con)struction, patriarchal dichotomy

### BİR YAŞ DÖNÜMÜ RÜYASI: BEDENSEL VE RUHSAL BÜTÜNLÜK

#### Öz

Asırlar boyunca kadın bedenini asi, kontrol edilemez ve toplumsal düzeni bozucu her türlü şeytani kötülüğün kaynağı olarak inşa eden ataerkil düzen, zamanla kadınların seslerini duyulmaz ve bedensel deneyimlerini görmezden gelen kadın düşmanı bir sistem oluşturmuştur. Bu sistem içinde hapsolan kadınlar, sadece erkek arzusunun sessiz ve pasif nesnelere olarak görüldükleri için, bedenlerine ve cinselliklerine yabancılaştırılarak, bölünmüş bir kimlik ve anlayışı benimsemek zorunda bırakılırlar. Bununla birlikte, kadın bedeninin ataerkil yapıya karşı önemli bir mücadele ve direniş alanı olduğuna inanan ve kadının bastırılmış ve görmezden gelinen arzusunun dile gelebilmesinde kadın bedenini vazgeçilmez bir araç olarak gören Erendiz Atasü, eserlerinde cinselliklerini bir güç ve özgür irade ifadesi olarak deneyimleyen bağımsız kadın karakterleri resmetmeyi benimsemiştir. Kadın/kadın bedeni ile ilgili konuları göz önünde bulundurarak ve fallosentrik söylemleri yeniden yapılandırma teorilerine dayanarak oluşturulan bu çalışma, Atasü'nün cinselliğin en cesur ve yalın haliyle anlatıldığı eserlerinden biri olan *Bir Yaş Dönümü Rüyası*'nı inceleyerek, kadın bedeni ve cinselliği arasındaki ilişkiyi gözler önüne sermeyi

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All translations from the Turkish works belong to the author unless otherwise noted.

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ve bedensel/ruhsal bütünlüğe sadece beden farkındalığı ile ulaşılabileceğini kanıtlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** bedensel ve ruhsal bütünlük, kadın bedeni, kadın cinselliği, yeniden yapılandırma, ataerkil dikotomi

## INTRODUCTION

The 'mind/body dualism' has been one of the most controversial issues since Plato, who is considered the first dualist based on his assertions in *Phaedo*, the key point of which is the immortality of the soul hindered and obstructed by the body. That Platonic dualism between mind and body has become increasingly widespread among Neo-Platonic and Christian philosophers interrelating 'mind with immortality' and 'body with mortality' (Grosz, 1994). This perspective has gradually caused to the demonization of sexuality since it is considered dangerous for the immortal soul and tempting for the mortal body. Then, it turns into a gendered dimension, where whatever is bodily is associated with 'female' that is considered an obstacle to salvation and therefore needs to be renounced. In accordance with that, women's narratives and virgin martyr stories, in which Christian ideologies are situated, make women internalize the constructed idea that "the more broken a woman's body becomes, the more whole/holy her spirit becomes", as Claire Marshall asserts in her work (2000, p.11-12). As a result, through repeated references to the dualistic construction of body as opposed to the mind, and as morally corrupt and corrupting, the ideal 'no-body/nobody', who is purified from sexual sins and obedient to the 'Law of the Father' that represents the phallic order (Lacan, 1977) has been created.

Moving forward in time, especially in the Enlightenment Period, that split between body and mind has gained a radical perspective with the French philosopher René Descartes, who established, as Grosz states, "a dualism which three centuries of philosophical thought have attempted to overcome" (1994, p.10), especially by women since they are associated with 'bodilyness' within this Cartesian duality. That is why, "when a woman is given over to man... he demands that she represent the flesh purely for its own sake. Her body is ... a thing sunk in its own immanence" (de Beauvoir, 1953, p.189). Within this patriarchal dichotomy, thus, women and their bodies are objectified and viewed as men's possessions. They gradually turn into 'dolls of flesh' for male gaze as they cannot exist with their minds.

However, while men satisfy their phallic desires through female body, they also fear of feminine qualities of that body, which they consider demonic, uncontrollable and dangerous. For instance, Charles Pierre Baudelaire, a French poet, translator and literary critic, described "the female organ as a dirty thing or as a wound, dangerous in itself like all bloody, mucous, contaminated things [and] woman, that obscene and infected horror" (cited in Ussher, 1991, p.19). Along similar lines, in misogynistic discourses, female experience and body has always been portrayed as deviant, alien and seductive, and women have been forced to internalize the androcentric ideology claiming that no decent woman has sexual desires, but 'loose' women. Based on those assumptions, the male-dominant society de-sexualizes and de-eroticizes women's bodies to be able to preserve the patriarchal morality. In compliance with man-made gender

performances of 'chastity and decency', these patriarchally-constructed women learn to legitimize or mold hegemonic practices for through the cultural traditions that confine their subjectivity, and through the religious doctrines that impose closure ideas about identity and selfhood. Thus, as Barbara Katz Rothman explains in the following, women start to fear and hate their own bodies, which are considered a source of horror, shame and disgust by the phallogocentric discourse:

There are women who believe that they are less complete, less full human beings than are men, that they live more trivial lives, lives of less worth than those of their husbands or their sons. Think of how women learned to think of their own sexual experiences in men's terms, starting with "foreplay", proceeding to the *real* thing, "penetration", and end with ejaculation. We are still struggling with what it means to view women's sexuality, fertility, and bodies with women's own eyes (2000, p.13-14) (emphasis in original).

Bearing all these facts in her mind, Erendiz Atasü struggles for presenting alternative ways for women in *A Midlife Dream* through the awakening process of the protagonist, Feride, who finally puts an end to the fallacy of masculine power and its repressive ideologies that deny her autonomy, and gives voice to her body as the site of self-awareness and self-esteem – not as the origin of guilt and shame. In the end, Feride learns not to mold her sexuality, sensuality or emotions into socially acceptable patterns, and achieves the 'sexual and spiritual integrity' by moving beyond the boundaries of male gaze.

### FERIDE'S JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY

*A Midlife Dream* (2013), (*MD*, henceforth) at first glance, reminds the reader of *The Wren*, one of the canonical texts of Turkish literature, written by Reşat Nuri Güntekin. In fact, considering its theme and the characters, the parallelism between the two texts cannot be denied. Atasü uses Güntekin's novel as a sub-text and takes the advantage of her reader's interests by including this similarity within her novel:

They had turned *Feride the Wren* into a game they played between themselves. Sedat was quite a bit older than Feride, so he naturally adopted the role of Dr. Hayrullah, the elderly man Feride eventually marries, but never sleeps with, in the novel. In their version, though, there was no Kamuran, Feride's fiancé at the beginning of the novel, who betrays her, prompting her to leave Istanbul for the provinces. Ferhat did not fit that role. He would probably have been the major, the war hero whose handsome face was torn up by shrapnel during the First World War. Actually, Ferhat was equally distant from all three members of this small family and this distance could not be reduced no matter how many games they played. So Feride was left without Kamuran: sometimes she was the poor Feride with no love in her life and sometimes she was the lucky woman who did not have to deal with an unfaithful lover. The one part of the novel that they never touched was the little girl Feride adopted. Little Munise's tragic death made them shudder; nevertheless, the role was perfect for Şirin (*MD*, p. 63).

However, as well as the similarities, there are remarkable contradictions between the two texts, and the clearly portrayed sexuality is the most important of them. Feride, the protagonist of *The Wren*, represents the new Turkish woman, taking a leading role in the transformation of

traditional Ottoman Empire into the modern Turkey during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. She is the “enlightened mother” (Durakbaşa, 2007, p.104), raising the future generations, and sexless ‘sister’, having no need to tote a purity body guard. There is not even the slightest implication of Feride’s bodily experiences of sexual desire. On the contrary, Feride of Atasü’s novel breaks the chains of “the stable sheath of sealed nerve and muscle tissues that had enveloped her frozen emotions for nearly a year” (MD, p.21-22). Unlike *Feride the Wren*, accepting whatever happens to her by abandoning all her wishes concerning love, Feride, the protagonist of *A Midlife Dream*, is a kind of woman who demands “to ‘do’ things and to ‘change’ things; because just to ‘bear’ things is not enough for [her]” (MD, p.146) (emphasis mine). She never suppresses her desires. Therefore, despite the similarities between the two works, Atasü creates



new and different perspectives in *A Midlife Dream* by drawing attention to the sociocultural and political changes facilitating the female quest for individuation. She reveals further details about the themes of love, female body and sexuality, which she has started exploring in her earliest novel, *That Scorching Season of Youth* (1999), and the ‘sensual adventure’ of a woman, having been initiated by the protagonists of that novel, AyşeAysu and Tomris, reaches an immersive apogee with Feride. For too long, women, like AyşeAysu, Tomris and Feride, have been scared of the power of their sexuality or used it to manipulate, control and hide due to the patriarchal norms. Fortunately, the time has come for them to experience and activate their awakened sexual energy. Feride’s female journey into self-discovery and sexual awakening starts with Ferhat, her forbidden love. “That irrepressible desire she felt for him... The desire that weighed on her flesh and scratched at her heart with its painful longing” (MD, p.7-8) is very strong that she cannot help falling in love with Ferhat, because “a maelstrom that was beyond the control, independent, subtle and irresistible got hold of [her]... lust” (MD, p.20). She attains her desire, the body that she has been drawn to like a magnet, after the death of Ferhat’s wife. However, Feride gets very soon that she should not paint dreams but paint her own reality:

That first night, when after so many obstacles she was finally one with him, she lay there silently, like a broken question mark beside him, sleepless under her crushed dreams, while he was fast asleep taking big, contented breaths. The only explanation she could find for the feeling of incompleteness inside her was what would be expected of a woman in her situation with a similar life story to hers: an inadequacy of the flesh caused by extended abstinence, an insufficiency of her senses, not her partner’s. ... She had imagined it would be different for the two of them. She had hoped it would be. And now she hoped that everything would sort itself out in the long run, while she tried to nurture an imagined pleasure from the fact that Ferhat had finally and completely claimed her feminine geography (MD, p.22-23).

Unfortunately, like most women who are imposed to keep their body, or more precisely virginity, for their prospective husbands who will love them forever, Feride also gets

disappointed. Her desire, which she tries to keep alive, diminishes day by day “whenever crushed by her husband’s indelicate touch” (*MD*, p.23) (emphasis mine). Feride’s passion gradually “crumple[s], drie[s] out like a young plant subjected to the merciless blast of fiery air” (*MD*, p.22). Feeling discouraged, hopeless and lost, Feride chooses to lock herself up in her ivory tower again, just as she has been taught. She pretends to have a perfect marriage, free from emotional and sexual deprivation, and tries to turn a blind eye to everything concerning menfolk, like the other women in the family. Yet, it does not work. She feels as if “the ground slipped from under her feet; there was no air left to breathe. It was as if she stopped being human and was transformed into a pale, shadowy product of her imagination” (*MD*, p.9). Having lots of questions in her mind, Feride desperately tries to find a way out. She wonders if there is any possible way to get rid of this marriage, which drains all her energy, and shaped womanhood. Then, abruptly, all her questions arrive at a solution when she least expects it. Ferhat is killed by his own followers during an intra-organizational conflict. Feride stands all alone with her unrealized dreams, aspirations and passions at the very beginning of her midlife. The sole remedy available to her is to channel all her hopes and energy into Şirin, her step-daughter, because from now on, “it was utterly impossible for her to be attracted by a *new* body” (*MD*, p.28) (emphasis mine). Thus, she, once more, sets her passion “in a sheath of muscles, nerves and memory” (*MD*, p.28) till Sedat, who “surrounded Feride and Şirin with his magnetism, like a sparkling field of energy” (*MD*, p.35), comes into her life. Sedat, the second husband of Feride, is different from Ferhat in many ways. For instance, unlike Ferhat, always “making her feel a hunted animal soon to be caught and bound in chains” (*MD*, p.37), Sedat creates a safe environment both for Feride and Şirin. It is true that there is no passion or “persistent fire of desire” (*MD*, p.37) in their sexual relation, but she is happy in “her husband’s tender embrace” (*MD*, p.71). Most importantly, for the first time in her life, “when [Feride, Sedat and Şirin] were together, they managed to attain a wholeness that they had never had with Şirin’s biological father” (*MD*, p.35).

Feride is happy in her “warm and protective home” (*MD*, p.71), but sometimes, as she nears forty, she feels unexplained stirrings, “a very thin but vital vein in her quiet, peaceful inner world ruptures and bleeds towards the passion that had quietly pooled in her forgotten depths” (*MD*, p.64). Having one of those moments again, Feride cannot control the increased flow of blood through her veins that heats her body, and demands to have “an adventurous sex life... but Sedat [does not] like adventure. He [does not] even approve of the woman initiating sex...” (*MD*, p.108). Thus, once again, the woman is severely punished since she dares to speak out about her sexual pleasures instead of keeping her innocence and being a beacon of morality for her husband. Boiled with rage, Sedat pushes Feride hard, which makes her fall upon a radiator and hit her hip. Then, something unexpected happens and it changes both of their lives irrevocably:

[Feride] was staring in awe and confusion at the handfuls of dark, thick, scarlet liquid pouring out of her womb, which had not been able to bring a child to term. No, this red cascade with clotted lumps was not like the miscarriages she had had when she was married to Ferhat. It was something else! But what? Sedat’s large hands held her with care and tenderness. The ferrous smell of blood was in her nostrils. Her soul was split. One part of her wanted to take refuge in his compassion; the other was repelled by the

heavy hands and muscular arms of this big man and shuddered with sheer animal terror (MD, p.110).

Time stands still for Feride. She does not think about Ferhat, Sedat or even Şirin. The only thing she can focus is her “crumbling [body]... that nobody attached any real importance to, not even herself” (MD, p.114). Since the day she was born a woman, Feride has always felt incomplete, weak and insufficient as she is unable to have children and become a mother. And now, her fruitless “uterus together with the ovaries” is being removed by “total hysterectomy” (MD, p.110) and she is reduced to “a woman with emptied-out loins” (MD, p. 115). Feride hears questioning voices making decisions about her poor body: “It’s nothing to worry about. And I don’t suppose you were thinking of any more children at your age anyway” (MD, p.112). That moment crushes all her pre-formed illusions about her life, but it helps Feride unveils the mystery as well. She realizes that, during her entire life, she has been defined as the carrier of male offspring and considered insufficient as she is infertile. Neither Ferhat nor Sedat has accepted her as she is, as a woman with a mind and body: “They carved me up... Both of them... They laid their hands on the half of me they needed and ignored the rest... They each grabbed a different half” (MD, p.286).

Abused both sexually and emotionally by her intimate partners, Feride feels absolutely shattered. Her body, satisfying Ferhat, and her mind, pleasing Sedat, do not belong to her. However, it is time for Feride to crack down and take back the things that have been stolen from her:

I am a woman... I had a woman’s body. Now, I have an incomplete woman’s body: no uterus, no ovaries, a defective vagina. I would have liked to have been accepted as a complete body when I had one, as well as being accepted the way I am now. You cannot abstract my personality and my temperament from my body... You cannot take them independently of each other. I am a whole (MD, p.146).

Once Feride gains the ability to experience her desires and not repress them, her body and mind, trapped in the male-dominated ideologies, become ‘whole’ again. From now on, her primary focus is to break free from the patriarchal chains that hold her back, and make a fresh start. Unfortunately, this new phase of life with greater self-awareness and self-compassion comes during the midlife years with a tragic event. Though a bit late, she starts a spiritual journey and opens “the lost box of her life ... with the excitement of someone who has discovered a buried



Erendiz Atasü

treasure” (MD, p.120). While trying to face her unfulfilled and repressed desires, Feride happens upon a very young man, Kamuran, a gay friend of her daughter, Şirin. Nevertheless, Feride does not care about his age or sexual orientation. All that she can feel is the ecstasy of utmost delight as emanating from the pleasures of her body. Despite being aware of the impossibility of having a sexual relationship with Kamuran for obvious reasons, Feride merely dreams about the

pleasure of physical contact with him and getting the ‘imaginary sensation’, as stated by Erendiz Atasü. Kamuran is just a total combination of “Sedat... Ferhat... and even like her dear father” (MD, p.289). The image of Kamuran stirs a “crazy desire that burrowed deep into her vagina” (MD, p.292). Eventually, this desire becomes so uncontrollable that her body rediscovers its repressed emotions and her inner voice hidden deep inside and bawls unexpectedly: “For God’s sake! It’s carving out my vagina! I don’t care if he’s queer! I don’t care if he’s half my age. I need him, do you hear me? All of him! For the first time in my life I want a cock!” (MD, p.288).

Feride, for the first time in her life, feels self-confident and determined. Others may assume that she is going through a female midlife crisis, but Feride knows her own mind. From now on, her needs are more important than anybody else’s; nothing and no one else counts, including her daughter. Just as nobody questions or even thinks about a woman “let[ting] her husband put his piss-soaked dick inside her” (MD, p.118) (emphasis mine), her cracked bladder and “vagina leaking urine” (MD, p.118) cannot be seen as the villain of the piece. Where she is now puts her beyond the trivial; or rather, redefines as trivial what she has previously considered problematic. She puts an end to defining herself as insufficient and ‘emptied-out’, and takes pride in being a woman achieving personal autonomy and integrity by getting rid of the patriarchally-shaped roles. Feride is now a whole woman with her mind and body. And this spiritual and sexual wholeness is obtained through full body awareness.

Erendiz Atasü, who believes that self-individuation can only be achieved by articulating the unspoken female body and its repressed desires, analyzes such broad themes as the female body and sexuality in her writing to elucidate the issues of sexuality and gender, sexuality and love, and sexuality and oppression. Bearing in mind how a person’s sexual behavior becomes an expression of power, Atasü also aims to unite the female body and mind that have been estranged from each other by male-dominated ideologies and its sexist man-made language in *A Midlife Dream*. This intended spiritual and sexual integrity comes to fruition only with feminine principles and ‘female language’, placing emphasis on female body experiences and their articulation. Henceforth, women are able to de(con)struct dichotomous gender stereotypes produced by the dualist discourse, which assumes the male-as-the norm, by means of this female language. The female body is an important site of struggle and resistance against the patriarchal structures, a medium through which a woman can articulate her repressed and ignored desires. Thus, Erendiz Atasü portrays the female body and its sexual experiences in *A Midlife Dream*, as in all her works, to raise awareness and feminist consciousness in her readers by breaking free from the internalized male gaze and its hegemonic ideologies that dominate women’s lives in all fields. Once a woman starts a journey of self-discovery – the journey that starts with awakening and ends in enlightenment, she will realize how deeply patriarchal ideology and its hegemonic language are rooted within her very thinking. To be able to de(con)struct them, the only way for her is to stick at feminine principles constituted by a female language. Thus, in this way, these “feminine principle[s] will initiate a cycle proposing a notion of integrity, rather than the duality of patriarchal structures” (Koyuncu, 2014, p.193) (emphasis mine). It is that cycle which will let women “kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing” (Cixous, 1976, p.880), and create the welcoming

world where there is no othering, denial and ignorance; where different voices can be heard and different choices are accepted without questioning – the world that Feride has always dreamt about and finally reached in her midlife.

## CONCLUSION

Though expressed in a sexually explicit language, *A Midlife Dream* does not irritate the reader since it is conveyed in a poetic way, adorned with such a vivid glow of female sensibility. Feride's journey of self-discovery dominated by a sense of recognition and connection attracts readers, especially female ones, and makes them come out of their shells and cease feeling remorse or guilt about their bodies and desires. Knowing this fact, within *A Midlife Dream* and her other works also, Erendiz Atasü intends to clarify that women have always been suppressed and exploited within and through their bodies, which are regarded as the sources of male pleasure and fantasies. Being reduced into the male-defined feminine bodies, women lose their mind/body unity and thereby acquire a split identity, like Feride, who gets stuck between Ferhat, desiring her body and Sedat, favoring her mind. That is why; Atasü is in a constant search for bringing split selves together and achieving a spiritual balance and union – 'wholeness' – in which all aspects of life blend, dissolve and merge into each other. In accordance with that, Atasü's Feride recovers from the chains of her 'broken body', and lifts the veil of mystery that blinds her mind and grasps the truth. Getting rid of the binaries, the contradiction, or rather, the patriarchally-constructed conflict between a woman's body and mind ends and the distance between them is diminished. Eventually, Feride regains her spiritual and bodily integration and in her self-discovery journey to transcend herself as object, she proves what it means to become a 'whole woman'.

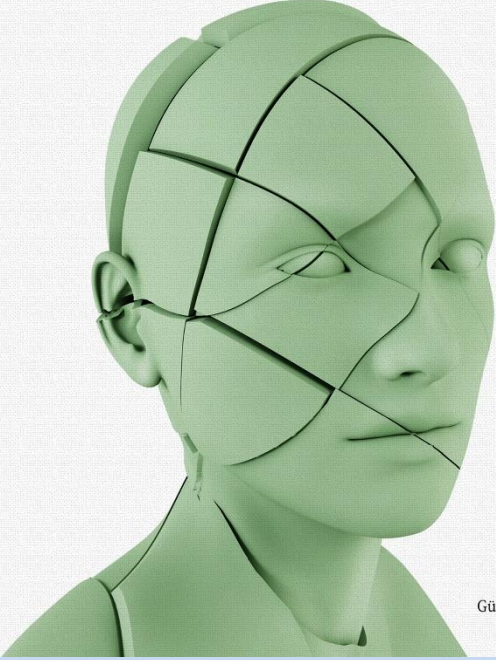
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# TÜRK BİLİMKURGU EDEBİYATI VE ARKETİPLER

DR. VELİ UĞUR



Günce Yayınları

Oktay Yivli

# Öykü Nasıl Okunur

modern öykü ve yöntem



Günce Yayınları

MAKSUT YİĞİTBAŞ

Edebiyatın Ebemkuşağı

Halit Ziya Hikâyeciliğinde

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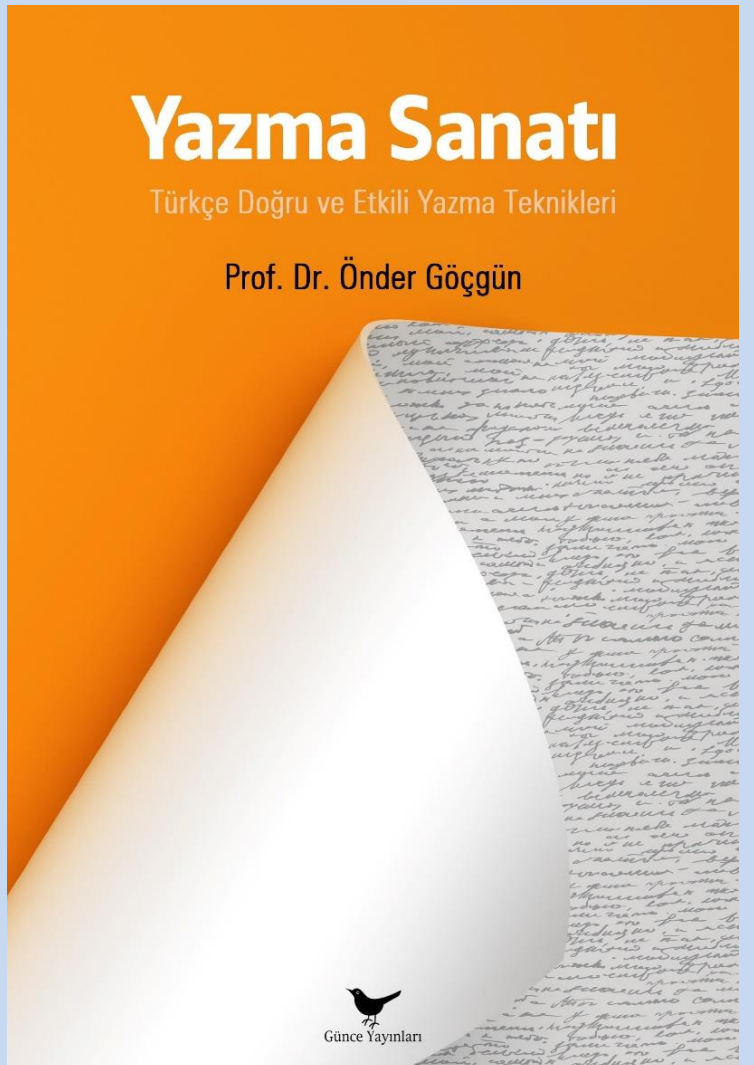


Günce Yayınları

# Yazma Sanatı

Türkçe Doğru ve Etkili Yazma Teknikleri

Prof. Dr. Önder Göçgün



Günce Yayınları