



# Selim Işık's Agony in Oğuz Atay's *Tutunamayanlar*

Oğuz Atay'ın *Tutunamayanlar* Romanında Selim Işık'ın İzdırabı

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## Abstract

This paper discusses the source and aspects of agony vexing Selim Işık the protagonist to a suicide at an early age in Oğuz Atay's *Tutunamayanlar*. In this respect, Selim Işık's Sartreanly defiant disposition is demonstrated by textual analysis. In the paper, an intertextual method of comparison is occasionally employed by dint of references to another remarkable miserable protagonist in Turkish Literature – namely Doktor Hikmet in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's *Bir Sürgün*. Besides, throughout the article where available and applicable, references are made to some canonical works of Western Literature including Ibsen's tragedies, Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in order to further substantiate and accentuate the arguments made.

**Keywords:** Oğuz Atay, Selim Işık, Sartre, existence, rebel, suicide

## Öz

Bu çalışma, Oğuz Atay'ın *Tutunamayanlar* romanının ana karakteri olan Selim Işık'ın kendisini genç yaşta intihara sürükleyen ızdırabının kaynağını ve yönlerini irdelemektedir. Bu bağlamda, Selim Işık'ın Sartrevari meydan okuyan kişilik yapısı romandaki kimi alıntılar üzerinde durularak açıklanır. Çalışmada yer yer metinlerarası okumaya dayalı bir yöntem benimsenerek Türk Edebiyatı'nın bir diğer önemli, acıma duygusu uyandıran karakterlerinden Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu'nun *Bir Sürgün* romanındaki Doktor Hikmet'e atıfta bulunulur. Bunun yanı sıra, sunulan görüşleri desteklemek ve vurgulamak için, ilişkilendirilebileceği noktalarda Ibsen'in trajedileri, Kafka'nın *Dönüşüm*'ü ve Shakespeare'in *Hamlet*'i gibi Batı Edebiyatı'nın kimi klasik eserlerine de gönderme yapılmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Oğuz Atay, Selim Işık, Sartre, varoluş, isyankâr, intihar



Geliş Tarihi/Received 25.01.2024  
Kabul Tarihi/Accepted 05.09.2024  
Yayın Tarihi/Publication Date 30.12.2024

Cite this article as: Say, E. (2024). Selim Işık's agony in Oğuz Atay's *Tutunamayanlar*. *Current Perspectives in Social Sciences*, 28(4), 472-476.



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## Introduction

This article aims to dissect the origin and dimensions of anguish afflicting Selim Işık, the pitiable protagonist of Oğuz Atay's *Tutunamayanlar*, with occasional comparisons drawn between Selim Işık and Doktor Hikmet in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's *Bir Sürgün*. In *Tutunamayanlar* Selim Işık is stuck in a quandary of disparaging alienation accompanied by a sense of defeat and disillusionment which is evocative of the tormenting state Doktor Hikmet is engulfed in Karaosmanoğlu's *Bir Sürgün*. Nevertheless, whereas in Doktor Hikmet's case the main reason for his estrangement is more explicitly outlined as he is portrayed to be split and wedged fast between Ottoman socio-cultural framework which he longs to liberate himself from and maxims as well as manners featuring the European Civilization which he desires to internalize thoroughly despite his shortcomings at certain instances, in Selim's case the motive for his alienation is rather obscure to 'diagnose' plainly and elaborate on assuredly since the chief conflict perturbing him is not overtly explicated to the reader and thus retains its puzzling aura throughout the novel. Therefore, one may merely reflect on the presumably main motive for his sense of seclusion marked by a tangible notion of insufficiency or reluctance to get into communication with the society in which he feels imprisoned. Even Selim's close friends like Turgut Özben, Günseli, or Süleyman Kargı cannot infiltrate into his frame of mind thoroughly and sort out a convincing account of the 'essential' motive engendering his seclusion. At this point one may contend that Selim's agony – which is actually more intense than that of Doktor Hikmet since it is impervious to 'concrete' description – is a purely existential one. Namely, to reason, he is unable to cope with the nature and demands of his existence at both physical and spiritual levels. To be more precise; whereas Doktor Hikmet is discontented with the notion of being jammed between the East and the West, Selim is disgruntled over or rather tortured by having been born as a human being. He feels entrapped in his body as well as his physical environment. He feels being constantly strangled by all animate and inanimate objects surrounding him without the slightest glimmer of a redemptive prospect on the horizon. In this respect, some parallelism can be drawn between Selim and Hamlet who also hankers after the quintessence of life entangled in a rather pessimistic insight into human existence. Predictably, Selim defiantly rejects conforming to conventions and expectations imposed on him by the society as indicated in his refusal of marriage which can be deemed as one of the most crucial instruments assuming a key role in the consolidation and perpetuation of patriarchal order in a society. In this respect, it is not astounding at all that he feels betrayed by Turgut as he (Turgut) swerves from the path of dignified 'rebellion', acquiesces in a marriage, begets children, and thus submissively yields to the dull chain of procreation enabling the perpetuation of desolate human existence constantly floundering in a vicious cycle. In order to stave off the blows frequently levelled at him by aspects of his own physical existence and social environment, Selim devotes most of his spare time to cultivating himself by indulging in the affirmatively diverting habit of reading as a way of consolation and temporary relief from the sense of agony nagging at him. However, just as tuberculosis – at a physical level – is an incurably fatal disease sealing Doktor Hikmet's miserable 'annihilation', sense of agony incessantly nibbling at Selim is equally mortal at an existential level. Therefore, neither his intellectual interest in cultivating himself as an erudite being nor his apparent endeavour to formulate 'essential' attributes of his spiritual disease as exemplified in his attempt to summarize common characteristics of losers (*tutunamayanlar*) are able to save Selim from his portending ultimate destruction.

## Selim The Rebel

It is obvious that Selim's existential agony springs from a pungent notion of captivation in his own body as well as physical environment. In this respect, as is the case for Ibsenian protagonists' distress as delineated in his several plays like *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, naturalistic aspect of Selim's anguish is undeniable. No matter how vehemently he strives to shun encroachments and restrictions of his physical environment through contemplation and self-cultivation, he has to give in that “(d)üşünceler göklere yükseliyor, fakat vücut toprağa bağlı” (Atay, 2010, p. 307). Naturalistic root of Selim's agony manifests itself most saliently in his accusatory contemplation on his mother's choice of marriage with his father and consequently giving birth to him as he unleashes his wish that he were never born:

Anneme arada bir çatarım: kalıtım nedeniyle. Mendel yasalarıyla hırpalarım onu. Daha akıllı, daha kabiliyetli, daha becerekli olsaydın, ya da beni doğurmasaydın, diye yüklenirim ona. Eksik yönlerini düşünseydin; bunların çocuğuna da geçeceğini düşünerek evlenmeseydin. Liseyi bitirdiğine göre, sana da Mendel yasalarından bahsetmişlerdir. Ayrıca, babamla bu kadar farklı bir temel yapıya sahip olduğun halde, neden onunla evlendin? İkiniz, aşırı çelişik uçlarda bulunan karakterlerinizin bana nasıl etki edeceğini, benim hücrelerimi nasıl bir çıkmaza sokacağını hiç düşünmediniz mi? (Atay, 2010, p. 645)

As articulated in the quotation above and discussed in the preceding paragraph, the main ground for Selim's existential agony can be phrased as his vexation about being born as a human being and accompanying sense of helplessness or reluctance to

come into terms with the 'mechanics' of acting as a human being as he plainly points out in the quotation below which can be reckoned as a brief manifesto summing up the basic motives for his foreboding suicide:

Saat dörde doğru uyandım. Sabah yaşadığım öldürücü saatleri düşündüm. Bu duruma nasıl geldim? Neden bana yaşamasını öğretmediler? Neden bana, bizden bu kadar gerisini sen bulup çıkaracaksın dedikleri zaman isyan etmedim? Hayata atılmak gibi bir çılgınlığı nasıl yaptım? İnsanların dünyasına atılmayı nasıl göze aldım? Ben insan değildim ki. Yaşamadığım bir hayatın içine nasıl atıldım? Beni nasıl gürültüye getirip de bu soğuk bakışlı mimar gibi insanların karşısına çıkardılar? Onlar da bilemezdi: görünüşümle insana benziyordum. Denemelerden geçmiştim. Onları aldatmayı başardım. Sonumu kendim hazırladım. Her an ne yapacağımı söyleyemezlerdi bana. Beni aldattılar; gene de suçluyum. İnsanların en verimli olduğu çağda tükendim. Her anı, ne yapmam gerektiğini düşünerek geçirdiğim için çabuk yoruldum. Bana müsaade. (Atay, 2010, p. 607)

Under the light of this quotation displaying Selim's defiant attitude through the assumption of which he abides by his initial ideal and does not condescend to compromise with the dull 'mechanics' of servile human existence condemned to thrashing about between birth and death relentlessly, one may justifiably interpret Selim's suicide as his ultimate rebellious objection to human existence which he laudably rejects conforming to at the expense of an early physical death at around the same age with Doktor Hikmet. Thus, unlike Turgut who degrades himself to be assimilated into an ordinary cog tacked onto the vicious wheel of human existence through marriage, Selim solemnly sticks to his initial objective featured by earnest non-conformity as he commits suicide: "Sahte olmaktansa yaşamamak iyidir Turgut" (Atay, 2010, p. 447). In this respect, one may further comment that Selim attains a kind of existential emancipation in Sartrian terms by assuming responsibility, acting on his own will staunchly without yielding to external influences and thereby flavouring his existence with an exceptional individual meaning which should be, as emphasized by Sartre, the essential objective of any human being who wants or rather is obliged to construct an existence for oneself out of 'original' nothingness. To put in a nutshell, to Sartre, free will is the sole instrument for the creation of a distinct individual existence:

Der Mensch . . . ist vielmehr zunächst "Nichts". Und er muss sich erst, gleichsam in beständiger Schöpfung aus dem Nichts, zu dem machen, was er ist. Er ist "zur Freiheit verurteilt." . . . Der Mensch ist frei. Hier liegt der Übergang zu der zweiten Aufgabe, die Sartres Philosophie . . . erfüllen sollte: "positives Handeln" zu ermöglichen. Der Mensch kann sich in der Welt "engagieren". Im Handeln kann er Werte setzen. "In dieser Welt, in der ich mich engagiere, scheuchen meine Handlungen Werte wie Rebhühner auf." Die Selbstverwirklichung des Menschen geschieht im freien Entwurf ("projet fondamental"). . . "Meine Freiheit allein ist die Begründung der Werte". (Störig, 1963, p. 529)

Initially human being . . . is simply "nothing". And, first of all, so to speak, she/he must mould herself/himself out of nothingness to what she/he is in a consistent manner. She/He is "condemned to freedom." . . . Human being is free. Here lies the transition to the second task Sartre's philosophy . . . must fulfill: to enable "affirmative action". Human being is able to "get involved oneself" with the world. Through her/his actions she/he can create her/his own values. "In this world with which I get involved my actions flush values like partridges." Self-fulfillment of human being occurs through free design ("projet fondamental"). . . . "My freedom is the sole rationale for values". (My Translation)

In an interview with Oğuz Atay on *Tutunamayanlar* in 1972, Atay indicates the Sartrian free will as a distinctive attribute in Selim's character as he praises Selim as "(h)erkesin 'tutunan' olmak istediği bir ülkede tutunamayanlığı seçen". An evident repercussion of Selim's existential agony manifests itself in vacillation, mingled with a poignant notion of confusion, as a peculiar character trait of Selim. The crystallization of indecision as a peculiar attribute of Selim's disposition is entrenched in the sense of alienation from the society pestering him and consequently his quest for the assumption of a stable meaningful identity which would help alleviate the intensity of his estrangement from his environment. In "*Ulysses ve Tutunamayanlar*'ın Karşılaştırmalı İncelemesi" Mümtaz Sarıççek acknowledges "aydın bireyin yabancılaşması ve tutunamaması", which finds a concise and touching expression in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* in world literature, as a major concern of Atay's novel. Berna Moran also underlines individual's alienation as a primary concern communicated in the novel as observed by Barış Kılınç in "Yabancılaşmış Karakterler ve Politik Eleştiri: Yavuz Turgul Sinemasından *Muhsin Bey* Örneği": "Moran, . . . *Tutunamayanlar*'ın hem söyledikleri hem de söyleyiş biçimi açısından bir başkaldırı olduğunu; bu başkaldırının içeriğini ise burjuva düzeninin kurallarına, değer yargılarına, beğenisine ve yaşam biçimine ayak uyduramayan, topluma ya da başka bir deyişle kapitalist ahlak anlayışına yabancılaşmış yalnız insanların oluşturduğunu söylemektedir" (Kılınç, 2008, p. 228). Relatedly, Sarıççek observes that *Tutunamayanlar* can be treated as a text narrating the doleful collapse of the 20<sup>th</sup> century idealist individual's utopia who feels desperately alienated due to failure to catch up with the burgeoning demands of one's 'suffocating' physical environment: "Fiziki çevre ise, modern çağda insanı boğan bir labirente dönüşmüştür. Modernizmin yarattığı yeni kutsallar etrafında sürüleştirmiş insanın algılamaları da öncü postmodernist romanın aydın bireyini

ötekileştirmiştir. Artık aralarında derin bir uçurum vardır” (Sarıççek, 2009, p. 553). Just as Doktor Hikmet drifts across between the 'Eastern' and 'Western' banks of the life river to a yawning 'waterfall' as a metaphorical token of his abject end despite his vigorous striving to land safe and sound on the 'Western' shore which unfortunately proves to be futile, Selim occasionally fluctuates between contradictory behavioural attitudes. For instance; initially he means to dissuade his friend Metin from getting involved in a love affair with Zeliha and succeeds in his attempt. However, then Selim falls in love with Zeliha and makes advances to her to no avail. Eventually he breaks up with Zeliha. Another instance that can be asserted to illustrate Selim's sense of confusion and more significantly relentless quest for a satisfactory meaning that would probably cheer him up manifests itself in his rapidly shifting literary taste as distinctly viewed in his breeding admiration for Oscar Wilde over a period of time and then almost abruptly switching his interest and appreciation to Maxim Gorky. His innate existential captivation occasionally induces Selim to dash into opposing extreme ends of a scale. For instance; whereas he pays a visit to a brothel in his adolescence in a way to disappoint the reader expecting such an intellectually aspiring person not to trifle with the pursuit of bodily pleasure at the expense of incurring justifiably levelled allegations of misogyny, in his later ages Selim mostly seems to 'liberate' himself from an indulgence in the fulfillment of corporeal pleasure by leading an almost reclusive life immersed in intellectual pursuit as a way of sublimation to divert his life energy into a different direction to let out: “Yaşamaktan yorulmuş, diyordu. Bir gün birlikte adaya gitmiştik. Bana eski bir manastırı gösterdi. Üç yıl önce manastıra çekilmeyi düşünmüş” (Atay, 2010, p. 449). Accordingly, Selim does not abstain from poring over the major books of monotheism like the Bible and Qoran along with non-religious literary and philosophical works. Nevertheless, as indicated in the novel, Selim's intellectually transcendental aspiration to cultivate himself as a way of grappling with the impenetrable existential dead end he has been rushing towards since his birth cannot save him from committing suicide.

### Selim's Politics

Selim's intellectual and behavioural oscillations as exemplified in the paragraph above can be argued to highlight Selim's identity crisis which corresponds to his failure to assume a stable ideological stance. Like Doktor Hikmet, Selim longs to tightly clutch at an unstaggering ideology or rather an insight into existence that would help spare him or at least alleviate the sense of bitter vexation stemming from his incapability of providing his existence with a satisfactory meaning. In this respect, Selim engages himself with reading and appreciation of a wide range of fictional and non-fictional texts. Nonetheless, he fails to embrace and abide by a particular ideology in his quest for a glimmer of hope conducive to existential redemption as he frequently switches from one to another. Just as Doktor Hikmet pines away in his initially enthusiastic attempt to assert himself as a true *Parisien*, Selim withers away in his contemplation to relieve the unendurable burden of being a human being by flavouring his existence with a soothing streak of meaning. Despite being basically an overwhelmingly existential issue, Selim's identity crisis can at least partly be accounted for as a sense of imprisonment among present, past, and distant past as implied by Atay at a socio-cultural level through his deliberate occasional linguistic shifts between the use of Modern Turkish, Ottoman Turkish, and Pre-Islamic Turkish in a manner to correspond to the three major stages of the Turkish State throughout history which can chronologically be enumerated as Pre-Islamic Turkish State, Islamic Turkish State, and Modern Secular Turkish State. Although at first glance it may seem far-fetched, Atay's employment of Turkish language's diverse forms as if to correspond to and accentuate the three major socio-political, cultural, and administrative phases of Turkish History can be reckoned as a subtle adumbration of Selim's relentless quest for a stable cultural identity as a representative of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkish intellectual who longs to wring oneself free out of the tight grip of this fundamental identity question. This unresolved identity issue, which remains dangling at the end of the narrative and from which Selim vigorously tries to extricate himself throughout the narrative, constitutes the quintessential ontological question raised in the novel.

### Conclusion

To recapitulate, as meant to be illustrated in this article through a discussion of alienation theme in the accompaniment of an identity crisis as communicated via the depiction of Selim Işık as a pathetic protagonist winding up in a miserable end – i.e. to borrow a conventional phrase, death in the bloom of life – in his quest for an unstaggering meaning that would enable Selim Işık to cope with the sense of estrangement he is smitten with within the 'suffocating' socio-cultural framework he feels tormented by in Atay's *Tutunamayanlar*; Turkish intellectual's inexorable conflict with the conservative socio-cultural framework one feels besieged by as if to precipitate a fatal sense of spiritual vacuity has always been characterized by an initially eager quest for a reviving and reliable identity to abide by that would enable the individual to enjoy a Sartrean existential redemption while still alive through free will. Nonetheless, unfortunately, as clearly portrayed in the novel, the intellectual's quest for a 'salvational' solution to settle the identity crisis that would enable one to, if not efface but at least, cope with the disillusioning notion of alienation has crashed into a dead end and been shattered to pieces as Selim Işık has

failed to or rather, to express bluntly, preferred not to conform to the impositions exerted on him by condescending to strike a deal with the socio-cultural framework he is constrained by as an attestation of compromise that would be an abject acknowledgement of surrender on his part. In this respect, Selim's untimely death instinctively arousing pity can be considered a rebellious staging of the Sartrean emancipation at the expense of utter physical annihilation which is death. Relevantly, in Selim's case, Sartre's concise adage "Hell is other people" both literally and metaphorically communicated in his play *Huis Clos* manifests itself with a twist as Selim's uncompromising endeavours ending up in failure to decide on and affirm his sort of individual 'otherness' converts his own physical existence as well as social surroundings where he is engulfed by 'others' into a hell for him. Thus, through suicide, Selim desires to espouse a sort of vacuity in lieu of a hell perpetrated by the irreconcilable conflict between a failed individual otherness and the others.

*Hakem Değerlendirmesi:* Dış bağımsız.

*Çıkar Çatışması:* Yazar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan etmiştir.

*Finansal Destek:* Yazar, bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

*Peer-review:* Externally peer-reviewed.

*Conflict of Interest:* The author have no conflicts of interest to declare.

*Financial Disclosure:* The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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