

Virginia Woolf in Turkey:

An Interview with Dr. Ali Gunes

By Leo J. Mahoney



Ali Gunes is assistant professor and chairman, Department of English Language and Literature, Kafkas University, in Kars, Turkey. Kafkas is in many ways a frontier university. Kars is located in east-central Turkey in the Caucasus Mountains, some 40 miles from both the Armenian and Georgian borders. Kafkas (Caucasus) University was founded in 1992, but its English department is only a little over three years old. Since then, it has made some remarkable progress and has more than a hundred students from all over Turkey now studying in its undergraduate program, as well as dozens more from the university's science departments who must try to acquire English reading and writing skills. The faculty includes four Ph.D.s (Liverpool, Kent State, Ataturk, and Aegean universities) and a graduate specialist in English as a Second Language. Dr. Gunes spent the years 1993-1999 studying in England and Scotland at Liverpool and Dundee universities before coming to Kars to found its English program. He has published extensively, in English, in Turkish scholarly journals and has just completed a book-length study of Virginia Woolf. He was recently interviewed in Kars on his work by Dr. Leo J. Mahoney, a frequent reviewer for *MultiCultural Review* and since January 2003 an assistant professor of conversational English and American literature at Kafkas University.

Leo J. Mahoney: Dr. Gunes, your particular research interest is the life and perspectives and writings of Virginia Woolf. Why is that?

Ali Gunes: I'm interested in what you might call the continuities and discontinuities of literary modernism. Virginia Woolf's works and views don't completely break with the literary traditions of the West, but she does try to reshape them.

When did you first become interested in literary modernism?

At Hacettepe University in the early 1990s. As an undergraduate student in Turkey, I found mastering English literature before about the eighteenth century too difficult—especially Old English language. Also, the strong influence of Christian

culture in the early literary periods was hard for me to understand. Perhaps I'm better at them now.

It would seem so. Anyway, your reply is interesting because it prompts a question I had not planned to ask you. Why did you take up the study of the English language and its literature in the first place?

Well, I'd initially intended to become a lawyer, but I decided to take a year off after high school and study English at Ankara's Middle East Technical University (METU). I soon concluded I should stick with English because I started to feel that it was where my best abilities lay. My English teachers at METU advised me to enter Hacettepe University, also in Ankara, as the surest route to perfecting my English. While I was at Hacettepe, I got interested in modernist literature, since I felt it was more or less related to some of my own life experience here—the current evolution of modern society, technological developments, and secular culture in general. As a result, I began to seek common characteristics that bind English and Turkish cultures. Since that time, I have found what I was after in those days [under the concept of] modernization.

Anyway, as you say, you began to focus on the modern period more or less by default.

I just felt a greater affinity with post-eighteenth-century literature. The First World War, for instance, is profoundly related to the emergence of modern Turkey and its culture. As a child, I'd listened to my grandfather's stories about the war. Later, I watched historical films, read newspapers of the time—all of it was directly related to forms of modernist expression.

Perhaps you could tell us what you mean, then, by the word "modernism."

Well, it's different from the historical idea of modernity. It doesn't start with the Renaissance, or—as some critics would

have it—with Greek secular antiquity, of all things. But it's generally accepted in literary circles to refer to a couple of generations, from about 1890 to the 1930s. All the aesthetic developments of that era—in art, music, and literature—are closely related. It's not an especially easy term to define, but it amounts to an approach to life and thought that rejects traditional values—religious and moral—as well as kinds of authority based on hierarchies. On the positive side, modernism suggests a constant development of human potential—a process without an end, perhaps—rather than a stable or fixed worldview and social order. The modernist experience of life is very fragmented—a life that's a combination of diverse experiences, an accumulation of different, even indeterminate impressions.

Since your main research interest has recently been the novels of Virginia Woolf, how is your idea of modernism reflected in Woolf's novels?

In many ways, actually. Not only reflected in her novels, but also in her social and cultural views. In terms of literature, she invented new methods and styles by which she represented her complex modernist outlook. For example, her characterization is different from that of the Victorian writers, like Jane Austen, in the sense that she's not able to portray characters in a linear way from birth to death. Woolf gives her readers some examples of her characters' thoughts and behaviors so that readers have two ways of building up impressions about them. First, her characters feel things or they talk to one another about life, realities; so you have an impression that's given out by the character him- or herself. Secondly, Woolf's characters talk about each other—their tendencies, feelings, or emotions, reactions to events or to their environments. So the reader can construct his or her views of Woolf's characters, rather like one does when watching a film or a dramatic play. The technique is definitely impressionistic and, for that reason, also debatable.

Your recent study is called The Issue of Woman in the Novels of Virginia Woolf: A Cultural Evolution. As I understand it, your book takes up Woolf's views of gender relations in her own lifetime. How is this theme related to her modernist approach to writing?

I suppose the simplest way to put this is to say that the issue of gender relations is a part of Woolf's modernist argument. She is frequently criticized for ignoring social or political or economic problems of her time; for instance, she was attacked by E. M. Forster and by Jean Guignet on this matter. But I have to say that Woolf did deal with such issues in her novels. Unlike D. H. Lawrence, for example, who used his novels as social propaganda, Woolf employed a more aesthetic approach in her literary works.

Interesting. Exactly how do you mean "aesthetic approach"?

It goes back to her characterization. Woolf used an artistic

method in which she made her characters, and even her readers, develop what you might call an expansive view of social and political issues. In *The Voyage Out*, for example, Clarissa Dalloway quits her artistic studies and turns to problems of poor children in the streets of London and other cities. Another example is in *Night and Day*, which deals with the issue of contemporary marriage. Woolf observed the traditional, or Victorian, style of matrimony as a subordination of women that left them without any voice in both private and public spheres. The character named Katherine Hilbery is a good case in point here. Lastly, even 20 years later, in *Between the Acts*, Woolf attacks "the subconscious Hitlerism" of men, which they pursue in making war. It isn't Adolf Hitler but an ostensible proto-fascist mentality of men that's a psychological and social issue for Woolf. So, you see, she uses her novels not as a means of direct propaganda but as aesthetic and artistic media in which she implicates her characters—as well as her readers—in her consciousness of social and political issues.

Do you feel you can offer any special insight into Virginia Woolf as a result of your research?

I should probably say here that I have learned a lot from my studies of Virginia Woolf. In terms of my experience of two cultures—Turkish and British—there are some obstacles facing individuals here. Most Turkish intellectuals may seem to outsiders as somewhat limited in perspective due to their ideological biases. There's a kind of a rhetorical warfare in Turkey among novelists, poets, and essayists of left-wing and right-wing persuasions. This dense political orientation seems to me to restrict their creativity. By contrast, Virginia Woolf demanded complete freedom of expression without any submission to an ideological agenda. She said she had no country because her country was everywhere. Her concern for humanity, she thought, could connect her to anyone's life anywhere. Moreover, let me say just one more thing here while we're on this question. She's talking about a common social life and culture in the world, and she criticizes social hierarchies in the sense that those who are a part of a hierarchy live an ivory tower existence without getting into the problems of common humanity. So Woolf tries to eradicate artificial distinctions between what she thought of as a higher and a lower culture. This is a profoundly important tendency of the democratic age. In the same connection, she also contributed a lot to feminist arguments of her time—yet another hierarchy feminists call patriarchy—which enables me, for instance, to see women's problems in my own country from a comparative perspective.

That leads easily into my next question. What's the extent and the significance of Virginia Woolf studies in Turkey?

Well, besides myself, there are—or I should say, there were—a couple of people in Turkey studying Virginia Woolf. Mina Urgan of Istanbul University, who wrote a couple of books on Woolf in Turkish, has recently died. Another scholar—

Woolfmaniac, I call us—is Basak Uysal at Ataturk University in Erzurum, which is not far from Kars. Sometimes we exchange ideas. Last March, we chatted because he was writing about *The Voyage Out* and I had some articles for him that I'd collected.

So there are just the two of you left, then?

Well, it's interesting that you ask this because recently, in a communication from Basak Uysal at Ataturk University, I discovered that there are a couple of women academics in Turkey who are Woolfmaniacs too.

So are you planning to keep their names to yourself?

I'm talking about Professor Oya Batum Mentese at Atilim University in Ankara, for one, and then there's Dr. Gonul Bakay at Beykent University in Istanbul. Professor Mentese's focus seems to be directed toward Woolf's experimental literary techniques in modernist fiction. But not long ago, I read Dr. Bakay's recent book on Woolf, *Virginia Woolf and Communication* (2001), which I'd overlooked. As far as I know now, Professor Mentese hasn't published significantly on Woolf yet.

What's in Dr. Bakay's book, then?

Dr. Bakay approaches Virginia Woolf from a feminist perspective. She's examining the issue of patriarchy as it confounds the ability of Woolf's typically traditional characters—and even that of some of her younger women—to communicate successfully with the wider world. Another issue is that men in Woolf's novels don't seem to pay attention to what their female counterparts are saying. The men too often see the subtext of women's thoughts and expressions as frivolous. By the way, Dr. Bakay's book is in Turkish and that means it's particularly useful for comparative and multicultural studies here in Turkey.

Speaking of patriarchy, and feminism, especially here in the eastern part of Turkey, what's your personal take on Woolf's perspectives?

Frankly, I first worried that I wouldn't be successful as a Woolf scholar since my own cultural background was rather conservative—indeed, patriarchal. Then, as I got into Woolf's novels, I gradually began to see the social life they depicted as a kind of key to the social changes going on around me here more than fifty years after her death in England. These changes are most apparent in Ankara and in western Turkey generally, though they are occurring much more slowly out here in eastern Turkey. So Woolf's work has not only helped me to come to grips with—to categorize and analyze—my own heritage but also to appreciate the social and psychological changes, the dilemmas, of the present age in Turkey.

In that case, please let me interject another unplanned question.


Exactly when did this personal epiphany occur?

What I noticed in Woolf's fiction and nonfiction works is that her views about the issues of women contradicted my childhood views, which were shaped by my grandparents. I'm the product of what Americans call a broken family. My study of Woolf progressed, and my views about the representations of women in society gradually started changing. So my early view did not turn into an obstacle before me as I tried to make a detached or fair-minded analysis of the women's issues raised in Woolf's writings. But my study of Woolf contributed profoundly to the expansion of my perception and enabled me to make comparative evaluations. In a word, I came to notice that there were several similarities between the problems of women in England in the first half of the last century and those of many contemporary women in Turkey.

Let me end by saying that even with the work of the four of you—two male and two female scholars of Virginia Woolf's writings—that's not much in the way of Woolf studies in this country these days.

I confess that Virginia Woolf studies in Turkey are in poor shape. In my view, there are two main reasons for this condition. First, Woolf's a complex, difficult, and diverse subject both as a personality and as a writer. So it's a bit daunting. One can approach her in many directions—in terms of her literary innovations; stylistically; through sources of material; through her arguments related to the social, political, and economic issues of her era. A second reason for the paucity of Woolfmaniacs in Turkey is that, apart from those who went abroad to study, scholars here are short of critical materials they would need to make adequate research into Woolf's body of work. Of course, I do not include here textbook materials accessible to classroom teachers of surveys of modernist literature. This situation of shortages of research materials makes the first reason I just mentioned even more problematic.

Do you have any suggestions to make to MultiCultural Review's readers concerning Virginia Woolf studies in Turkey?

Sure. I would ask native English-speaking readers to help provide Turkish scholars with critical studies in the modernist period in general and in Virginia Woolf studies in particular. The more materials we have here, the better we can advance our research in these fields. I'm actually talking about my own department in Kafkas University, but what I'm saying here is applicable to many a Turkish university's English department. 

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