

Saffron Yellow

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Interviewed by Hande Öğüt, Varlık Magazine, April 2007

Saffron Yellow is the final link in the trilogy you originally published as Modern Times of Deception; it follows Green and Purple. With this novel, you point to three colours and time periods. Green inspires trust, whilst purple symbolises femininity as well as oppression and harks back to splendour since the Byzantine era. Yellow, on the other hand, symbolises transience, distrust and even illness. Looking at the social, political and individual progress of the three novels, we see a bottleneck involving confidence in the future. Did this play a part in your choice of colours?

I did, indeed, connect colours to the time period I had chosen without necessarily seeking a direct equivalence. A novel's title arises out of the sense it evokes; however, a great novel is always more than its title. *Modern Times of Deception: Green* is set in a Turkey under an Islamist party rule. The protagonist –and incest victim- Melike Eda has had an oppressive religious upbringing. Her abuser -her uncle/step-father- defines himself as pious and leads the ruling party's district chapter. Green as a colour symbolises this atmosphere and has religious undertones. *Purple* is set in a twenty-four-hour period and relates the forty-year-story of a landed family and their recent trials and tribulations as it touches on death, suicide and murder, and on various shades of purple. *Saffron Yellow*, on the other hand, casts a light on the upper classes with warped senses of reality. This is the world of wealth, the generation who play out against, or indeed, within, a gilded background. What I wanted to describe by the use of yellow was a period when we lost our purpose, when superficiality, egotism and stereotyping all came to the fore.

The influence of the historical on the individual forms the main axis of your work. In Saffron Yellow, you define a lack of future under the effects of the depoliticisation of the post-1980 period. As if now nothing that is private is political...

Almost... But no more. Everything is political, even its absence. That's how this generation was raised. We had to put up with such hardship and pain in this country that we raised our children to be quiet, to be well behaved to spare them similar suffering. Driven by cowardly hypocrisy we kept them away from politics, from 'meddling here and there!', from demanding their rights or opposition. We entered them into races as mere tots, into endless exams, and made them addicted to success.

And then we became 'globalised' all at once. Punters popped up to think and decide on our children's behalf. This system swept aside the useless and drew to its side those it could use. It told residents crammed into 'plazas with unopenable windows' what to eat, wear, read or watch, how much to work, or even how to make love in lists of *ins* and *outs* and in pretty little parcels with bows. Created stereotypical ideas. Politics was predictably demoted, and worrying about reality became a waste of time, replaced instead by a sardonic criticism of everyday issues or the quirks of society, a chattering and saccharine style of debate. To the extent that these young people began to assume an air of invulnerability, anything penetrating their armour invited derision for failing to conform. They regarded other young people who do worry about problems or who make fundamental statements as dated. They disregarded their own loneliness, hard working conditions, the void they'd fallen into and the love they didn't have the time for. This generation was created not by us but by this age and this system that conspire to materialise everything.

The shattered, oversensitive and intractable Nedim of *Green* and Bertan of *Purple* who hangs himself from the plum tree in the garden both choose death, shattered by their inadequacy in defining their own positions in the battle between the old and the new. And now we've arrived at *Saffron Yellow*: I notice an increasing number of young people suffer as they clash with all these ideas, concepts and methods that have been redefined in an atmosphere of muddled values. Alienated from life, these young people are bleeding.

The desperate characters in Saffron Yellow seek an exit. But two wrongs do not a right make... Listen to Adorno, and no one can write poetry after Auschwitz. How can anyone write novels after the 1971 intervention and the 1980 coup? How much can anyone write about anything? Can you draw for us a panorama of the past thirty years as a writer who seeks and questions our place in history?

I didn't write a single line for four years after the 1980 coup and my first novel had to wait until 1990. Pre-coup literature was overtly politicised: between the 'Forties and the 'Eighties, all our great writers traditionally described our own people as they focused on the problems of the country. It has now been thirty-seven years since 12 March 1971. As far as I can remember the silence then was a relatively short one. Poems, novels and stories about that period recorded those events in the memory of literature. In contrast, the silence that followed 12 September 1980 lasted much longer. Serious literature took its time; the only exceptions were written in prison. And later, in the newly created virtual liberty, these efforts were disdained as old hat and found wanting. Social literature was unfashionable; endless accounts of

suffering, tiresome observations and memoirs no longer interested the reader. Instead literature focused on the individual, on personal problems and love. The subject matter soon changed, becoming too obscure, difficult or mysterious for the carefree, entertaining or 'elite' reader. The sufferings of the 'Eighties survived in poetry for a while. And then the poets also discovered love. It took time for quality novels on the 12th of September to appear on the scene, and literature itself became quickly commercialised in the early 'Nineties, just like all the other arts. The international publishing market tends to prioritise bestsellers and quick reads aimed at the average reader. We have taken our inevitable share of this transformation. Some writers set out to create uncontroversial bestsellers based on specific formulae. Readership numbers are on the rise, although the quality of the work is debatable. Anyone concerned with social problems and bearing witness to their own time worries about literature painting itself into an increasingly smaller corner, an unwarranted concern in my opinion. The art of the novel does give us the opportunity to capture the time as we entertain the reader, make him think and cut him to the quick. If we know how to connect life and literature, and if we are able to create a fine, new and impressive language, what we have to say will ultimately reach the majority. There is much to tell about the human condition and the human heart in Turkey. So long as we can see them.

All your books refer to the recent history of Turkey as you examine the effects of political turbulences on the individual. The novel entitled Scenes of a Massacre, however, commands a special place in your backlist. Are you going to focus on such political events that change an entire era again? For instance, may we look forward to an account of the Iraq war from your pen?

This happened quite spontaneously, and stemmed from my perception of the world and people. It was the faces of women on my TV screen that inspired *Scenes of a Massacre*. I later saw the same faces in Bosnia, in Afghanistan or Iraq, wherever, that is, that the ugly weaponry of imperialism entered. I wish I had the wherewithal to go to all these places, to talk to all these women and to write of them with all my heart.

Since you began writing, that is, in the past thirty years, what changes have you observed in the male-female roles, and the younger generation's approach to traditions, systems and ideology?

There are distinct changes in the educated section of society. They're gentler, they share more and they are more tolerant. And yet, economical necessity still dictates

traditional. In my experience, the capacity for wealth creation plays a crucial part in defining those roles. The most challenging part is the emasculation of the conventional male role. The world may change, but mutual perception and conditioning complicates acquiescence. Approaches differ, and role distinctions are no longer as clearly delineated in the metropolises. Everything has an impact on relationships: roots, family education levels, culture, media and communication. Sweeping statements would be premature, at least until perceptions on women and honour advance. I do harbour small hopes, though: middle-aged male feminists, for instance, come to my book signings. I'm aware that young men also agree with me, find me just and enjoy reading my novels.

Your female characters are indisputably of the historical period and the conjuncture, and you describe all with equal competence: the small bourgeois, the worker, the Anatolian woman and even a prostitute. To the extent that all your female characters take on a life of their own within the novel all the way to the end. How come, therefore, you do not see yourself as a feminist writer, given your skill in creating women and their problems?

A single glance at my work will reveal my attitude at once: my compassion and pity I regard weak and oppressed women wronged purely because of their sex, and the abhorrence I feel at male domination and cruelty. I view myself as first and foremost a feminist from top to toe, a woman who has carried out radical revolutions in her own life and fought tooth and nail to mark out her living space. Not that my philosophy would allow any other option, in any case. I have always opposed the general concept of women in society, women's position and the heavy burden they have to carry. I find women incredibly beautiful, intelligent and strong, and also appreciate the huge gains made by feminism. The issue was the misrepresentation of a statement I made years and years ago as a reaction to certain conservative viewpoints and sweeping hatred of men; I'd claimed not to be a feminist in this instance, and suddenly found myself branded an anti-feminist. This is precisely the facile, one-track, idea poor attitude that I'd found objectionable in the first place, an example of lack of perception, of superficiality. Of course I like men too, and able to appreciate just how powerless they are, and how frightened of women, since the real culprit is social impositions. I oppose generalisation. Enlisting men so that we can solve problems together, instead of pushing them away. I suspect what we need now is an entirely new spirit of feminism.

You have the capacity to describe women of every walk of life as if you yourself were each and every one. You clearly have a defiant call to refuse to submit... Yet as a writer you also show

how the individual who cannot conform to the existing system is still connected to the social. Is it possible to avoid this is a parent contradiction?

I try to be realistic and understand, instead of judging human foibles. I detest, and so avoid, idealism and a didactic approach in literature. At any rate, I identify with my characters to such an extent that when they step outside the parameters I imagined for them, I view this as further proof that they are alive. That's how the logic of life engages with the reality of writing. There are ways of avoiding conforming to social norms, although it's not always that straightforward. I envisaged Eylem, one of the characters, as sophisticated, resilient and a perceptive poet. It's only life that exhausts her. If anything, it's the system that demands her conformity. It's not a hopeless situation. We have to accept this may not always signal an irreversible loss. You may fall, survive, and climb out. That's how life tests you.

In Saffron Yellow, you examine gender roles as you introduce us to gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transvestites. Virginia Woolf advocates that a person must possess both sexes to be whole. What do you think? Why do all these different identities meet in Saffron Yellow? Is there a woman inside every man or is there a man inside every woman?

Without a shadow of a doubt. This is what I wrote of many years ago in *Dead Male Birds*. Several of my novels feature homosexuality. I believe sexuality to be the most mysterious and sumptuous aspect of human life, one that deserves to be enjoyed in a multitude of ways with no limitations. The majority of bans, sins and rules on sex stems from denial and oppression intended to restrict people, to force uniformity and simplistic definitions, and this is precisely what makes them so easy to become extreme, and therefore vulnerable. This aspect of the human condition is included in my novel so I may observe the only area of liberty left to these characters who'd already been defeated by the system one way or the other and robbed emotionally. Unforeseen developments did arise, though, like *Melike - Hayali*.

Your style is highly poetic. The Heavenly Winter of Love was a poetic text I remember reading in one sitting. Similarly in Green, the lyrical/poetic style virtually enveloped the text in a halo. Yet first in Purple, and now in Saffron Yellow, you have selected a different style altogether. Is this a new tendency you've adopted to better reflect the individuals of the global capital era where everything is mixed up, employs and annihilates, and where money becomes the world, and the social fabric of our time?

Such an astute observation. I had to describe this chaos from on high. *The Heavenly Winter of Love* belongs to a period when I was highly emotional, nay, hurt even, at a time when I love occupied my thoughts. In *Modern Times of Deception*, I got carried away by the melancholy impossibility of the romance between Melike Eda and Nedim. It was winter and I'd locked myself up in solitude in the summerhouse: the novel took over after a while. I was living in that world; I'd completely identified with Nedim, narrating in the first person singular, and was as emotional and radical as he was. *Purple* and *Saffron Yellow* both are novels with a multitude of main characters; this makes the first person singular awkward to sustain; it would hamper the flow. I still tested a variety of alternatives in starting both *Purple* and *Saffron Yellow*. The change you refer to is the narrative voice that took much experimentation. I still find this voice poetic and intense, simple, yet carefully crafted.

Literature and politics are inextricably linked, as the former is also inspired by the fine arts and cinema. Your training in painting comes across in your descriptions. Do you favour an interdisciplinary approach in literature?

Absolutely I do. Cinema inspires and seduces me, and tempts me to write. Painting is ever present in my life. What really surprises and saddens me is the number of our artists who entrench themselves in a single discipline and see the world behind blinkers, from that single point of view. Take a painter who never reads. Doesn't care a hoot for music. Actors who don't visit a single exhibition and are ignorant of philosophy. This to me is being mono-dimensional, and pathetically lacking in the most important dynamics of creativity.

Fragmentation is one of your main concerns. You examine the effects of social and political fragmentation on individuals, and you begin by breaking names. 'Çetin/Metin' and 'Kerim/Nedim' in Green, 'Suna' broken into 'Su' and 'Na' in Dead Male Birds, 'Halise/Alis/Sara' in No Love, No Death, 'Hayati/Hayali, 'Hasan/Handan and Mutena/Eylem/ Elvan' in Saffron Yellow... It's that fragments these last characters. What is the cause? Is the longing for integrity a utopic dream?

I used to find these disintegrations tragic. Later, I began to perceive this phenomenon as growth of a sort in this barren atmosphere. Why should we be whole and singular? And how? A dark dictatorship wrenched our human rights and freedoms – including the freedom of association- thirty years ago. We spent the following ten years struggling to recover what we lost, consoling ourselves with the colourful and

entertaining fiction of globalisation. Yet we continued to suffer. We buried our young people and resources into the never-ending conflict in the Southeast, and allowed crooks and global capital to usurp our future. Worse still, our hopes of prosperity and integration with the world have been squandered on imprudent administrators for the last ten years. We are a country drowning in debt whose economy is hanging by a thread, a country anticipating a crushing crisis any moment. Everything has an impact on us: domestic and foreign problems, health, education, poverty, unemployment, law and order. Do we therefore have any other choice but create false 'me's, figures deceptively similar to us, that only dissociate us from identities that never quite define us?

You said in one of your interviews, 'The artist is open to internal fragmentation whilst projecting personal experiences onto the object.' How do you divide or undergo a spiritual transformation as you write of these instances?

I'm one of those people who can only attain personal unity through the writing process. Yet I have to accept splintering myself in order to assume the spirits of my characters. This does occasionally lead to inconsistencies in my daily life and personal relations, which probably explains my preference for going into seclusion when I write. I accept no visitor and avoid company. I don't really know who I am throughout that process. The only thing I can perceive is a woman writing, an insane mess!

Ingeborg Bachmann writes of a woman on the verge of her thirties in Thirtieth Year, expecting the curtain to rise so she may get the nod and boldly confront all that she's thought and done to date to discover what she really values. Disappointment awaits this intrepid woman: she is, in fact, entrapped. In celebrating your thirtieth year with Saffron Yellow, you focus on people caught in traps. Did you feel similarly suffocated as you were writing?

The suffocation had already begun a few years earlier in my case, well before I began writing this novel. I was devastated at how my own sons, my young friends or the children of my friends were raised; someone, somehow, stole their lives. Their lives, dreams and hopes for the future. They were tired, weary and uninterested. I was full of despair and outrage. That's why I wanted to write, so I may find release... But no, it's only getting more intense. The young do understand me, but I had no idea they were this many.

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