

Article

Sufism, Prison, and the Marxist: The Case of Sabahattin Ali

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Abstract

The intersection of state power and literary dissent in the early Turkish Republic provides a critical context for understanding how modern nation-states manage intellectual opposition. Prevailing historiography often compartmentalizes the prominent socialist-realist writer Sabahattin Ali's career into disconnected traditionalist and secular Marxist phases. Challenging this assumption of linear rupture, this study synthesizes genetic criticism, James C. Scott's theory of hidden transcripts, and Lev Loseff's concept of Aesopian language to reveal Ali's underlying epistemological continuity. Examining an expanded corpus—including early poetry, coerced carceral revisions, private correspondence, and socio-realist prose—the analysis demonstrates that his early literary formation became a vital repertoire for negotiating state coercion. Findings show he strategically deployed the Sufi Ottoman *zâhir-bâtın* (external form versus inner essence) paradigm to camouflage Marxist commitments beneath a performative public transcript of nationalist compliance. Concurrently, he repurposed a transitional polysemic lexicon—navigating Sufi technical usage, classical literary inheritance, and broader Ottoman–Turkish colloquialisms—to articulate secular, revolutionary awakenings. Ultimately, while authoritarian coercion exacts a superficial public transcript of conformity, the hidden transcript of intellectual autonomy remains highly resilient, utilizing traditional theological frameworks for modern political evasion.

Keywords: Sabahattin Ali; genetic criticism; hidden transcripts; Aesopian language; state censorship; Turkish literature; sacralization of politics; Sufism

1. Introduction

The intersection of state power, religious sociology, and literary production provides a critical vantage point for understanding how modern nation-states consolidate authority and manage intellectual dissent. The transition from traditional, religiously legitimated empires to secular nation-states rarely involves the total eradication of the sacred; instead, the divine right of kings is systematically supplanted by the sacralization of the nation, the state, and its founding figures (Gentile 2006, p. 129; Schmitt 2005). When dissident intellectuals clash with this newly sacralized political apparatus, the resulting friction often occurs within the material and psychological confines of the carceral system. The specific paradigm—in which an intellectual is imprisoned or dismissed, only to have their reinstatement made conditional upon visibly publishing a retraction—is a recurring global mechanism of statecraft. For instance, in the Soviet Union, the prominent Kazakh poet Olzhas Suleimenov was forced to publish a coerced retraction in the state-run *Kazakhstanskaia Pravda* to maintain his public standing (Rozsa 2024, p. 92), while during China's political movements, forced ideological retractions were formalized into public self-critical essays (*jiantaoshu*) to regain party standing (Licandro 2018, pp. 6, 27, 50). In



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all these cases, the governing authority demands that the intellectual visibly authors their own subjugation.

The early Turkish Republic serves as a paradigmatic historical context for observing these dynamics. The Kemalist project's specific form of laicism subordinated Islamic institutions to state control while aggressively constructing a secular civil religion centered on Turkish nationalism and the charismatic cult of the nation's founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Davison 2003; Küçükcan 2010; Atalay 2018; Ciddi 2009). Within this environment, the state developed a structural hostility toward dissident literature, routinely deploying systemic prosecution, imprisonment, and exile against a broad spectrum of poets and writers—from Nâzım Hikmet to Rıfat Ilgaz (U. Bulut 2017). This persistent targeting demonstrates that the carceral suppression of poetics was an enduring apparatus designed to neutralize ideological competition.

Despite this extensive history of persecution, the historiography of Turkish dissenters contains a significant research gap regarding the precise mechanics of state coercion and intellectual survival. While recent scholarship attempts to deconstruct official history (Philliou 2021), anchoring the narrative of dissent to elite figures who ultimately reconciled with the establishment fundamentally limits the historiographical scope (Soyubol 2022). This elite-centric focus obscures the granular mechanisms through which the state extracted performative loyalty from its most vulnerable, nonconforming critics. The forced public retraction operates as a sophisticated mechanism of control, prioritizing visible submission over genuine belief; yet, it rarely succeeds in truly altering the intellectual's underlying mindset, standing instead as an indicator of the state's underlying anxiety regarding the power of the written word.

The case of Sabahattin Ali (1907–1948), a prominent socialist-realist writer and educator, offers an exceptional lens through which to address this historiographical gap. However, existing scholarship on Ali's intellectual trajectory frequently relies on a teleological assumption of a *linear rupture*. As established earlier, existing historiography frequently compartmentalizes Sabahattin Ali's intellectual trajectory into disconnected traditionalist and Marxist phases (Bezirci 2007). Because of this assumption, scholars analyzing his early textual revisions—such as Korkmaz (1997, pp. 50, 317–18) and Kara (2000, pp. 114–15) examining the semantic shift of his poem “Nefes” from honoring the Sufi mystic Abdülkadir Geylani to praising the nationalist ideologue Ziya Gökalp—frequently misinterpret coerced or opportunistic adaptations as genuine reflections of ideological oscillation. By failing to historically problematize the severe carceral reality of these texts' production, the existing literature often underestimates Ali's sophisticated methods of navigating state paranoia.

To correct these critical oversights, this article challenges the *linear rupture* narrative by demonstrating the profound epistemological continuity underlying Ali's survival strategies. Synthesizing genetic criticism with James C. Scott's anthropological theory of hidden transcripts and Lev Loseff's concept of Aesopian language, this study substantially expands the textual corpus under examination. Moving beyond a singular focus on poetry, it investigates the ideological transmutations in “Nefes” (hymn/breath) and his panegyric “Benim Aşkım,” (My Love/My Passion) alongside the strategic subversions in his play *Esirler* (The Captives), his private carceral correspondence, and his seminal socio-realist novel *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* (Yusuf from Kuyucak).

The primary contribution of this research is twofold. First, it demonstrates that rather than abandoning his classical and Sufi aesthetic roots upon embracing Marxism, Ali tactically deployed the traditional Ottoman dichotomy of the *rind* (the esoteric seeker of inner truth) and the *zâhid* (the dogmatic representative of external orthodox rules). This deeply ingrained *zâhir-bâtın* (external form versus inner essence) paradigm, originally acquired during his provincial youth, later became available as a repertoire for negotiating

censorship, ultimately functioning as a ready-made Aesopian language to camouflage his Marxist commitments and systemic critiques beneath a veneer of nationalist or mystical compliance. Second, by excavating how a polysemic lexicon—encompassing deliberate Sufi technical usage alongside broader classical and colloquial Ottoman–Turkish idioms—was intricately repurposed to articulate secular, revolutionary awakenings, this study reveals how traditional religious affects can carry modern political commitments. Ultimately, this article argues that while the disciplinary state can successfully coerce a public transcript of ideological conformity on the exterior (*zâhir*), the hidden transcript of intellectual autonomy remains remarkably resilient, preserved within the inner layers (*bâtin*) of the coerced literature.

2. Theoretical Framework

The dominant premise of classical secularization theory—which posited that modernization inevitably leads to the total disenchantment of the world—has been rigorously challenged by scholars examining the deeply religious dimensions of modern mass political movements (Casanova 1994; Gentile 2000; Kulska 2023). The sacralization of politics occurs when a secular, earthly entity is elevated to an absolute, transcendent value (Gentile 2000, pp. 18–19), becoming the focal point of a comprehensive system of beliefs demanding existential devotion from the masses (Gentile 2000, 2006). Emilio Gentile distinguishes between two manifestations of this sacralization: civil religion and political religion (Gentile 2000, pp. 24–25). Civil religion, a concept developed by Robert N. Bellah (1967), typically operates within pluralistic frameworks, utilizing generalized religious symbols to foster social integration while acknowledging individual autonomy (Gedicks 2009, p. 892; Bortolini 2012, pp. 190–92; Gentile 2000, pp. 24–25). Conversely, political religion represents an authoritarian extreme that is inherently exclusive, systematically denying individual autonomy to enforce dogmatic orthodoxies and classify political opponents as heretics threatening the sacred state order (Gentile 2000, p. 21; 2005, 2006, pp. 47–48). Importantly, the boundary is not absolute; civil religions can acquire intolerant, integralist features without reaching exterminatory totalitarian extremes (Gentile 2000, p. 25).

When dissident intellectuals clash with states operating within this aggressive, liminal space, their survival strategies can be understood through James C. Scott’s theory of hidden transcripts, which reveals that systemic domination creates a dual linguistic and behavioral reality (Scott 1990, p. 4). The “public transcript” constitutes the open, ritualized compliance performed in the direct presence of authority to ensure survival (Scott 1990, pp. 2–3); as Scott astutely observes, “the more menacing the power, the thicker the mask” (Scott 1990, p. 3). Beneath this performative veneer lies the “hidden transcript”—the concealed discourse and aesthetic practices occurring offstage where the oppressed articulate true grievances and preserve their ideological integrity (Scott 1990, p. 27). Evaluating a historical subject solely by its public transcript inevitably leads to the false conclusion that subordinates enthusiastically endorse their own subjugation (Scott 1990, p. 4).

In literary production, this dual reality frequently manifests as “Aesopian language” (Scott 1990, p. 197), which, unlike the offstage hidden transcript, operates hidden in plain sight. Coined as the “ability to speak between lines” (Saltykov-Tchedrin 1988, p. 447) and theorized by Lev Loseff (1984), it functions as a specialized literary system generating a second, hidden semantic layer to communicate subversive messages to an informed readership while deceiving state censors (Savinitch 2005, p. 109). Loseff (1984, pp. 50–51) identifies two primary structural mechanisms within this system: “screens” (stylistic devices or superficial compliance concealing the taboo message) and “markers” (subtle textual anomalies or intertextual references that signal a subtext and invite sympathetic readers to read “between the lines” (Loseff 1984, p. 4).

To trace the deployment of Aesopian language and the dynamic evolution of transcripts, this study utilizes genetic criticism. Reacting against structuralist fixity, this methodology pivots scholarly attention from the “finished” artifact to the ongoing “work in progress” across textual evolution (Barthes 1971; Bellemin-Noël 1972; Ferrer 2010; Lebrave 1992). Researchers compile a dossier encompassing “exogenetic” influences and “endogenetic” evidence like initial drafts (Debray-Genette 1979). These materials are chronologized into an analytical construct called the *avant-texte* (de Biasi 2015, pp. 52–54), forming an interdependent, functioning system alongside the published work (Bellemin-Noël 1972, p. 15) that exposes interpretative layers the polished version conceals. Applying this lens to Sabahattin Ali’s carceral literature reveals his internal strategies for navigating censorship. Specifically, in the analysis of the poem “Nefes,” the 1926 manuscript dedicated to Geylani functions precisely as endogenetic material. Regardless of its initial publication status¹, it structurally constitutes the *avant-texte* when systematically organized and compared against the 1931 iteration published in *Atsız Mecmua*. The subsequent lexical and structural revisions thus serve as a visible record, capturing the enduring intellectual resistance of the author.

To ensure philological rigor when analyzing this textual corpus, this study methodologically distinguishes between three overlapping linguistic registers prevalent in the early Republic: standard Ottoman–Turkish colloquial idioms, inherited classical forms, and the deliberate activation of Sufi technical usage. Recognizing the polysemic nature of the transitional lexicon allows for a precise identification of when traditional theological frameworks were actively repurposed for modern political evasion.

3. Historical Context: Early Republican Kemalism and Sabahattin Ali

3.1. The Kemalist Project and the Construction of a Civil Religion

Applying these theoretical paradigms requires a historical contextualization of the early Turkish Republic, formally established in 1923. The founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, alongside the Republican cadres, acutely recognized that replacing the multi-ethnic, Islamic legitimacy of the collapsed Ottoman Empire required far more than mere administrative restructuring; it demanded a fundamental re-engineering of the social psyche and the rapid establishment of a completely new civic consciousness (Özyürek 2006, pp. 95–96).

One of the primary intellectual architects of this profound sociological transition was the sociologist Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924). Heavily influenced by Émile Durkheim’s sociology—which fundamentally posited that religion was, at its core, the worship of society itself—Gökalp developed a theoretical synthesis aimed at reconciling rapid modernization with an authentic Turkish identity (Mumyalmaz 2025, p. 112). Gökalp formulated the ideological triad of “Turkification, Islamization, and Modernization.” Crucially, he viewed Islam not as an unalterable, transcendent theology, but rather as a highly malleable socio-cultural tool that could be harmonized with secular nationalism to achieve mass social integration (Gökalp 1918). Gökalp laid the sociological foundations for a national identity where the concept of the sacred was systematically and gradually transferred from traditional religious institutions to the abstraction of the nation itself (Mumyalmaz 2025, p. 118).

However, classifying early Kemalism as a direct and total application of Gökalp’s thought obscures the state’s highly selective and pragmatic inheritance of his theories. As Erşahin (2008) demonstrates, the early Republic readily adopted Gökalp’s structural blueprints—such as subordinating religious administration to the secular state apparatus and structurally separating jurisprudence from piety. Yet the Kemalist political project moved further than Gökalp anticipated and implemented this metamorphosis of the sacred: the formal abolition of the Caliphate in 1924 and the strict suppression of independent

Sufi brotherhoods (tariqas) completely removed autonomous religious authority from the public sphere. Religious administration was brought strictly under state control via the establishment of the Directorate of Religious Affairs (Davison 2003). While adopting some institutional mechanics, the Kemalist elite explicitly rejected Gökalp's insistence on retaining Islamic culture as a harmonized component of Turkish national identity, opting instead for a strictly secular, ethno-civic nationalism (Çetinsaya 1999). Consequently, Gökalp's "Turkish–Islamic Synthesis" was actively marginalized by the official regime between 1925 and 1945 (Mumyakhmaz 2025), surviving primarily within divergent ultra-nationalist circles—such as the writers surrounding *Atsız Mecmua*—who defended his ideas against statist erasure (Soğukömeroğulları 2013).

Concurrently, the state actively constructed its own secular civil religion. This was characterized by the deep sacralization of the nation, the codification of the ideological principles of Kemalism (the Six Arrows), and the promotion of a highly charismatic cult of personality surrounding Atatürk (Atalay 2018, p. 195; Bozdoğan 2001). Public spaces were completely reshaped by national monuments, history was officially rewritten to emphasize a glorious pre-Islamic Turkish past, and civic rituals—such as the public reading of Atatürk's *Nutuk* (The Great Speech)—functioned as the central liturgy of the new republic (Atalay 2018, pp. 232–39).

This consolidation of sacralized state authority in the 1930s was fortified by a stringent legal apparatus designed to systematically suppress political opposition and class-based ideologies. Following the brief and turbulent multi-party experiment of the Free Republican Party (SCF) in 1930, the state transitioned into a period of political "systole" (Mazıcı 1996, pp. 131–33). The promulgation of the stringent 1931 Press Law (Matbuat Kanunu) marked an aggressive shift in state policy, granting the executive branch unchecked power to shutter publications deemed contrary to the "general politics of the country" (Mazıcı 1996, p. 149). Concurrently, the state's stance against communism in the 1930s—previously treated as a manageable public order issue—escalated into profound institutional paranoia. Through aggressive amendments to the Turkish Penal Code and the deployment of press censorship, the regime transformed communism into an existential threat to the national body, criminalizing the mere thought and non-violent propaganda of class-based ideologies, which culminated in "minor" carceral punishments for left-leaning intellectuals and dissidents (E. Ç. Bulut 2020).

However, classifying early Kemalism strictly as either a pluralistic civil religion or a fully totalitarian political religion oversimplifies its historical reality. As established in the theoretical framework, states can operate within a porous boundary where civil religions acquire aggressive, integralist features. Early Republican Turkey occupied precisely this liminal space. While the state aggressively sacralized the nation and exhibited severe intolerance for ideological opposition (Zürcher 1998; Esen 2014; Parla and Davison 2004), it fundamentally lacked the mass violence of interwar European totalitarianism. Unlike the apparatus of Fascist Italy—which sought the total physical elimination of leftist dissenters, emblemized by the extensive imprisonment and slow death of intellectuals like Altiero Spinelli and Antonio Gramsci—the Kemalist regime's repression was largely conditional and transactional in the 1930s. It deployed state coercion and carceral punishment against both Islamic conservatives and Marxist intellectuals (Ryan 2017; Tuna 2018; Gökay 2018), yet it routinely offered a path to bureaucratic reintegration. It is within this specific authoritarian framework that the literary endeavors and carceral trials of Sabahattin Ali unfolded.

3.2. The Carceral Experience: Intellectual Genealogy and State Collision

Sabahattin Ali was intimately exposed to the vibrant political and artistic ferment of the Weimar Republic during his state-sponsored studies in Germany between 1928 and 1930.

He returned to Turkey deeply influenced by critical socialist and Marxist thought (Sönmez 2017, p. 12). Appointed as a provincial German language teacher, he rapidly integrated into leftist intellectual circles in Istanbul and Anatolia, collaborating with prominent figures like the revolutionary poet Nazım Hikmet and the progressive editors of the socialist-leaning magazine *Resimli Ay* (Göksu and Timms 1999). His unwavering commitment to social realism in his literature, which often highlighted the plight of the rural poor and the corruption of state officials, made him an immediate target for a state apparatus and ultra-nationalist milieus acutely paranoid about communist subversion.

However, to categorize Ali's intellectual trajectory merely as a linear progression from traditionalist or nationalist to a sudden Marxist awakening fundamentally overlooks his complex epistemological foundations. Prior to his integration into the *Resimli Ay* circle and his German education, Ali's formative years in the provincial centers of Balıkesir and Edremit embedded a profound classical and Sufi vocabulary into his literary repertoire. Between 1925 and 1926, he was actively involved with *Çağlayan*, a local yet highly sophisticated magazine managed by figures like Orhan Şaik Gökyay. Unlike the rigidly doctrinaire and ethno-nationalist publications that would later emerge in the Republic, *Çağlayan* functioned as a holistic intellectual platform synthesizing Eastern and Western literature, navigating the intense contemporary debates between *Divan* (classical Ottoman) and folk literary traditions without entirely discarding the socio-cultural heritage of the former (Bozdağ 2013).

Within this vibrant intellectual ecosystem, the young Ali interacted closely with two critical figures who influenced his early literary production: Ruhi Naci Sağdıç, a polymath who wrote both modern prose and Sufistic poetry under the Mevlevi pseudonym "Fani Dede" (Sağdıç 2005, p. 155; Duymaz 2016, p. 4), and Mehmed Gazâlî, known in the literary circles as "Gazâlî Bey," who authored philosophical treatises on *vahdet* (unity of being) and evolutionary mysticism and reportedly served as Ali's literature instructor (Bezirci 2007, p. 16; Bozdağ 2013, pp. 1080, 1086). This exposure to classical Islamic mysticism and Ottoman literary aesthetics equipped Ali with a sophisticated dualistic terminology—specifically, the traditional dichotomy of the *rind* and the *zâhid*.

To rigorously parse this vocabulary, it is necessary to recognize that the *rind*-*zâhid* dichotomy functioned differently across various registers of classical *Divan* literature. Within the broader classical literary inheritance—exemplified by poets like Bâkî and Nedim—the *rind* frequently emerged as a secular, epicurean figure devoted to earthly love, literal wine, and worldly pleasures, standing in mere social opposition to the ascetic. However, within explicit Sufi technical usage and the works of poets deeply engaged with mysticism—most notably Fuzûlî, whose allegorical treatise *Rind ü Zâhid* anchors this paradigm—the dichotomy is profoundly epistemological. In this Sufistic sense, the *rind* represents the seeker of inner, esoteric truth (*bâtın*), an unconventional lover of the divine who operates beyond rigid societal norms and institutional hypocrisy (Gökmen 2014; Sağlam 2016). Conversely, the *zâhid* embodies the superficial, dogmatic representative of external rules (*zâhir*), a figure who enforces strict compliance to the letter of the law while remaining blind to its spiritual essence (Sucu 2007, p. 232; Karayazı 2020). Ali's early literary output demonstrates a structural engagement with these classical motifs. As it will be discussed later, this is explicitly evidenced by his 1925 ghazal "Mey" and the 1926 "Gazel"—published in *Çağlayan* under the pseudonyms 'Sabahaddin' and 'Ali Selahaddin/Salâhî', respectively—which structurally center on the epistemological tension between the *zâhid*'s superficiality and the *rind*'s inner depth.

While it is methodologically problematic to deduce the exact nature of an author's personal theological beliefs solely from their literary artifacts, the recurring presence of the *zâhir*-*bâtın* dichotomy in Ali's early poetics indicates a deep, practiced familiarity with

navigating dualistic realities. His literary products reflect an active engagement with the tension between dogmatic, external authority and concealed, inner truth. As subsequent sections will detail, this deeply ingrained literary architecture—initially utilized to articulate classical theological concepts—would eventually serve as a vital aesthetic resource when he confronted the coercive apparatus of the early Republic. Consequently, the presence of these classical forms in his early work complicates the historiographical assumption that his later adoption of Marxist principles represented a total, chaotic ideological rupture, suggesting instead a more layered and cumulative intellectual evolution.

It was this complex intellectual profile that made his physical collision with the newly sacralized state immediate and highly consequential. In 1931, while teaching in the province of Aydın, he was arrested and detained for five months on charges of actively disseminating communist propaganda among his students. Though he was eventually acquitted due to a lack of evidence, this marked the definitive beginning of his marginalization by the state. The following year, in December 1932, a vastly more severe accusation was levied against him: he was arrested in the conservative city of Konya for allegedly reading a poem at a private gathering that explicitly insulted Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. For committing this act of ideological transgression against the central, sacrosanct figure of the state's sacralized political apparatus, Ali was sentenced to fourteen months in prison (Sönmez 2017; Korkmaz 1997). On April 29, 1933, he was dismissed from public service and subsequently transferred from Konya to Sinop, serving a significant portion of his time in the notoriously harsh Sinop Fortress Prison on the Black Sea coast (Taşan 1976, pp. 45–46).

His incarceration at Sinop represents a clear application of the regime's transactional coercion. Stripped entirely of his civil service employment and his physical liberty, Ali experienced a severe bureaucratic and geographic exile specifically intended to neutralize the ideological resistance of dissident intellectuals. The isolated fortress functioned strictly as a geographic and social exile. Within these damp walls, Ali produced a remarkable body of prison literature, most notably his famous "Five Prison Songs" (Hapishane Şarkısı), which vividly captured the severe psychological toll and sensory deprivation of confinement. Yet, the state's overarching objective was not merely to inflict physical suffering; rather, it was to extract a public confession of compliance—to force a symbolic rebirth that perfectly aligned with Kemalist orthodoxy. The state demanded, through the mechanism of the prison, that Ali completely abandon his hidden transcript of socialist dissent and formally adopt the public transcript of nationalist reverence.

Following his release, the carceral stigma continued to manifest as systemic bureaucratic resistance against his reinstatement to the civil service. Education officials, cautious of his conviction for insulting Atatürk, demanded explicit proof of ideological rehabilitation before approving his return (Korkmaz 1997, pp. 24–25). During this precarious transitional period—marked by financial reliance on translation work at his uncle's residence and personal setbacks, including a rejected marriage proposal to a friend—Ali was compelled to actively demonstrate his political loyalty. This necessitated the publication of the eulogistic poem "Benim Aşkım" in January 1934 and the strategic use of his play *Esirler* to dispel communist allegations. His bureaucratic exile formally concluded in May 1934 when, upon receiving explicit clearance from Atatürk, he was finally appointed to administrative roles within the Ministry of Education (Korkmaz 1997, pp. 25–27; Çukurkavaklı 1978, pp. 182–204).

4. Genetic Criticism and the Aesthetics of Survival

4.1. The Zâhir-Bâtin Paradigm in Early Poetics

Before examining Ali's eventual confrontation with direct bureaucratic coercion in 1934, it is necessary to rigorously analyze the semiotic architecture of his early poetics, which

instrumentalized theological codes to navigate existential terrain. This tendency is evident in his early mystical forms, such as the ghazels titled “Mey” (Wine) and “Gazel” published in *Çağlayan* magazine (Ali 1925, 1926), a recently uncovered ghazel dated 11 September 1926 featuring the “eyledim” (I did) refrain (Yörür 2024), and, notably, his 1926 hymn “Nefes” (hymn/breath) dedicated to the 12th-century Sufi mystic, Abdülkadir Geylani. Although these texts by Sabahattin Ali, which possess mystical qualities, are mostly unknown to the public, they have been discussed in some academic studies. Mehmet Narlı (2004, p. 135) emphasizes from the outset that there cannot be a metaphysical continuity in Ali’s texts published in the *Çağlayan* journal; while claiming that the “single poem” reflecting the mystical semantic world is the “Mey” ghazel, he does not analyze the text in depth. However, he completely overlooks the ghazel bearing the pen name “Salâhî” despite acknowledging its existence. Furthermore, Yörür (2024) has not conducted a literary analysis of the ghazel he discovered. Additionally, the 1926 poem “Nefes,” which is the most frequently cited in the literature, has not been examined in terms of its Sufi significance. Despite the near-total lack of scholarly interest in Sabahattin Ali’s classical-style poetry, it is important to point out that the author incorporated a sense of attribution into his early works (1925–26) by utilizing the pen name ‘Sabâh,’ especially in those poems constructed with a Sufistic essence. To rigorously assess the presence of Sufi epistemology in Ali’s early poetics, it is imperative to methodologically distinguish it from mere classical literary inheritance. Ali frequently utilized the structural forms of Divan poetry for strictly secular, observational, or socio-economic commentary, demonstrating that his engagement with these forms was not inherently mystical. For instance, his unpublished poem “Terkib-i Bend”—which he explicitly designated as a *nazire* (the composition of a parallel poem in response to a model text, using the same meter and rhyme scheme) to Rûhî-i Bağdâdî—employs classical architecture solely to describe his immediate circle of friends, completely devoid of esoteric connotations. Similarly, his poem “Gazel Naziresi”, modeled as a response to Nâilî’s ghazel and published in *Çağlayan* (Issue 11, 15 March 1926), functions primarily as a critique of contemporary economic conditions. Furthermore, his unpublished poem “Mesnevi” applies classical form to a secular narrative based on his days in Germany. Because Ali demonstrated the capacity to empty classical forms of their religious content and simultaneously composed poems in pure, everyday Turkish during the same period, the explicit mystical themes and the structural *rind-zâhid* (esoteric seeker versus dogmatic orthodox) and *zâhir-bâtın* (external form versus inner truth) paradigms present in “Mey” and “Gazel” (under the pseudonym Salâhî) cannot be dismissed as default classical reflexes. Instead, his deliberate retention of Sufistic epistemology in these specific texts indicates an intentional engagement with Sufi technical usage rather than a passive reproduction of broader Ottoman literary tropes, constituting a profound epistemological framework.

To understand how Ali would later camouflage his dissident intellect under carceral pressure, one must first observe how he constructed this dualistic worldview in his earliest publications. This framework is explicitly articulated in the ghazel published under the pseudonym “Ali Selahaddin” (using the poetic pen name “Salâhî”). In this text, presented in Table 1, Ali constructs a direct conflict between the arrogant representative of superficial authority and the seemingly ruined, yet inwardly enlightened, seeker (Ali 1926).

Here, the “mağrûr-ı dehr” (arrogant of the age) symbolizes the *zâhid*—the authoritarian figure anchored to worldly status and external rules (*zâhir*). The *zâhid* looks from the outside and despises the “harâb-âbâd” (ruined abode), which represents the social marginalization of the *rind*. Yet, Ali explicitly states that the true “treasure” (*gencîne/bâtın*) is deeply hidden (*pinhân*) beneath this ruined exterior. The clash between the “âkıl” (the dogmatic rationalist) and the “dîvâne/ârif” (the madman/mystic lover) establishes an upper-epistemological level where esoteric truth continuously outwits rigid orthodoxy.

Table 1. Parts of the Original Text of “Gazel”, English Translation by the Author of this Paper.

Line	Original Text	English Translation
7–8	Ey harâb-âbâdı tahkîr eyleyen mağrûr-ı dehr Gördüğün vîrânede pinhân bütün gencinemiz	O arrogant one of the age who despises the ruined abode, Our entire treasure is hidden within the ruin you see.
11–12	Mest-i hayret ârifi sanma sebük-ser, bî-haber Ey “Salâhî” âkılı hayretde kor dîvânemiz	Do not consider the mystic, intoxicated by wonder, as light-headed and unaware, O “Salâhî”, our madman leaves the rationalist in astonishment.

Ali further crystallizes this conflict between institutional orthodoxy and hermeneutic truth in his ghazal titled “Mey” (Wine), published in *Çağlayan* on 15 November 1925, under the signature “Sabahaddin”. In traditional Sufi semiotics, wine (mey) symbolizes divine love and the ultimate knowledge of reality (*mârifetullah*). Ali deploys this symbol to expose the blindness of the superficial orthodox figure, such as the sofi or zâhid, as can be seen in Table 2 (Ali 1925).

Table 2. Parts of the Original Text of “Mey”, English Translation by the Author of this Paper.

Line	Original Text	English Translation
1–2	Tercüman-ı sırr-ı Hak’dır kâmile mînâ-yı mey İtsede sofiyi dâim pür-gazab sîmâ-yı mey	The goblet of wine is the translator of God’s secret to the mature one, Even if the mere sight of wine always fills the orthodox ascetic [sofi] with wrath.
7–8	Sôfi bakmaz bâtına derk eylemez esrârını Ehl-i aşka münkeşifdir sırr-ı mey, ma’nâ-yı mey	The ascetic does not look at the inner truth [bâtın] and cannot comprehend its secrets, The secret of wine, the meaning of wine, is revealed only to the people of love.

While these couplets represent a traditional mystical critique of religious orthodoxy, they establish the epistemological foundation that would later become available as a repertoire for Aesopian communication when Ali faced state censorship in the 1930s. In the poem, the lyrical subject aims his critique at the sofi. It is crucial to clarify a linguistic nuance here for audiences unfamiliar with classical Ottoman literary tropes: while phonetically akin to the English word ‘Sufi’ (the mystic), the sofi (or sofu) in this specific poetic context represents the zâhid—the dogmatic, orthodox ascetic who rigidly enforces exoteric rules without possessing any deep spiritual reflection. Thus, the sofi—acting here as the embodiment of rigid external orthodoxy—reacts with fury (“pür-gazab”) merely by looking at the outward surface (“sîmâ”) of the wine, seeing it only as a profane, illicit substance. The subversive depth of this metaphor requires historical and etymological contextualization. The Arabic root for wine (*khamr*) literally denotes “to cover or veil”—specifically referring to a substance that obscures rational thought, which is the primary reason orthodox Islamic jurisprudence strictly prohibits it (Râgib 2012, p. 362).

However, within classical Sufi epistemology, mystics deliberately subverted this literal prohibition. They transmuted this physical ‘veiling of the mind’ into the esoteric concept of *sekr* (spiritual intoxication). In this paradigm, overwhelming divine love functions like wine: it temporarily suspends the believer’s calculating, mundane reasoning (*akl-ı cüz’i*) and their capacity for material discernment (*temyiz*) before the Absolute (Pürcevâdi 1998, p. 288; Kuzu 2014, p. 967). Because this spiritual drunkenness induces a state of complete worldly unawareness (*gaybet*), the mystic is elevated entirely beyond the rigid, disciplinary

control of orthodox juristic rationality (şer'i akıl) and the hypocrisy of conventional society (Saraç 2014, p. 140).

By synthesizing these historical concepts, Sabahattin Ali utilizes 'wine' not as a literal narcotic to soothe earthly sorrows, but as a traditional esoteric metaphor. It represents a profound esoteric truth that subverts the dogmatic, binary worldview of the zâhid (the orthodox enforcer)—a figure trapped in the calculating, transactional logic of heaven and hell. Thus, the dogmatic gaze remains trapped in the zâhir (the literal, external reality) and is fundamentally incapable of comprehending the bâtin (the inner secret). Only the "ehl-i aşk" (the people of love)—representing the spiritually informed seeker—possess the hermeneutic key to decipher the true, liberating meaning ("ma'nâ-yı mey") concealed beneath the prohibited surface. While not yet an anti-state political maneuver, this early poetic formation constructed the exact dual-readership structure that Ali would later activate as a political strategy.

4.2. Carceral Revision and Opportunistic Accommodation: The Transmutation of "Nefes"

As the 1930s commenced, this sophisticated literary output collided with the penal mechanisms of a consolidating nation-state. The definitive catalyst for this shift occurred on 25 May 1931, when Ali was arrested on charges of spreading communist propaganda and subsequently incarcerated in Aydın prison. It was within the confines of this carceral environment that Ali deployed his practiced zâhir-bâtin dichotomy not merely as a theological abstraction, but as a mechanism for socio-political survival. It is crucial to properly contextualize the nature of the state apparatus Ali faced during this period. While not a monolithic totalitarian state, the early Republican apparatus heavily policed its sacralized ideological boundaries. During periods of perceived threat of communism—such as the suppression of leftist dissent following the restrictive 1931 Press Law (Matbuat Kanunu)—the state's intolerance for ideological deviation made overt opposition physically and professionally perilous.

Through the methodological lens of genetic criticism, the most striking document emerges from this exact carceral period. The original 1926 text of "Nefes", available at Table 3, was thoroughly steeped in the traditional, ecstatic vocabulary of Islamic mysticism, dedicated to the 12th-century Sufi mystic Abdülkadir Geylani.

A structural hermeneutic analysis of this 1926 avant-texte reveals a poem entirely immersed in the esoteric vocabulary of the tariqa (Sufi brotherhood). The lyrical subject relinquishes individual agency, adopting the posture of a devoted disciple (mürîd) seeking absolute spiritual submission before the ghawth (the supreme spiritual helper, Abdülkadir Geylani). Every aesthetic element of the text reinforces a traditional religious hierarchy: the recognition of the guide's divine light (nur), the physical act of prostration, and the ultimate willingness to die for a transcendent, non-worldly cause. Furthermore, the rhythmic, repetitive invocation of the guide's name at the end of each stanza functions structurally as a textual dhikr (a Sufi ritual of remembrance), cementing the poem's identity as an ecstatic hymn directed toward an autonomous, sacred authority operating outside the purview of the newly secularized state.

Following the 1925 legal ban on all Sufi lodges (tekkes) and brotherhoods, overt public veneration of independent religious figures became politically hazardous. Confronting this reality from within his cell in Aydın, Ali strategically revised this poem. He published the altered version on 15 July 1931—while still actively imprisoned—in *Atsız Mecmua* a radical nationalist journal edited by his then-friend, Nihal Atsız. Ali deliberately dedicated the newly revised poem, available at Table 3, to Ziya Gökalp, the recently deceased intellectual father of Turkish nationalism.

Table 3. Sabahattin Ali’s Original and Revised text of “Nefes”, English Translation by the Author of this Paper *.

Line	1926 Original Text (Turkish)	1931 Revised Text (Turkish)	1926 English Translation	1931 English Translation
1–4	Kalplere serptiği kıvılcımlardan Bir ışık yanıyor ya Abdülkadir... Gönüller zatını bize aşk sunan Bir ilah tanıyor ya Abdülkadir...	Kalplere serptiğin kıvılcımlardan Bir ışık yanıyor ey büyük nebi... Gönüller, zâtını bize aşk sunan, Bir mürşit , tanıyor ey büyük nebi.	From the sparks he sprinkled into hearts A light is burning, oh Abdülkadir... Hearts recognize your essence as a deity That offers us love, oh Abdülkadir...	From the sparks you sprinkled into hearts A light is burning, oh great prophet... Hearts recognize your essence as a spiritual guide That offers us love, oh great prophet.
5–8	Bilirsin gönlümün ne duyduğunu Karşında tekrara hacet yok bunu Benliğim önünde ululuğunu Daima anıyor ya Abdülkadir...	Bilirsin göynümün ne duyduğunu, Karşında tekrara hacet yok bunu, Benliğim önünde, ululuğunu Daima anıyor ey büyük nebi.	You know what my heart feels, There is no need to repeat this before you, My selfhood constantly commemorates Your greatness before you, oh Abdülkadir...	You know what my heart feels, There is no need to repeat this before you, My selfhood constantly commemorates Your greatness before you, oh great prophet.
9–12	Başımız önünde geliyor yere Işıklar dağıttın sen gönüllere Pak tarikatına giren bir kere Seni nur sanıyor ya Abdülkadir...	Başımız önünde geliyor yere, Işıklar dağıttın sen gönüllere. Milliyet aşkını duyan bir kere Seni nur sanıyor ey büyük nebi.	Our heads bow to the ground before you, You have scattered lights into hearts. Whoever enters your pure brotherhood once Believes you to be divine light, oh Abdülkadir...	Our heads bow to the ground before you, You have scattered lights into hearts. Whoever feels the love of the nation once Believes you to be divine light, oh great prophet.
13–16	Ulviye nuruyla bizleri besle Uğrunda ölelim biz de hevesle; “Sabah”ın kalbi bu taze “nefes”le Beraber kanıyor ya Abdülkadir...	Mefkure nuruyla bizleri besle, Uğrunda ölelim biz de hevesle; Gençliğin kalbi bu taze nefesle Beraber kanıyor ey büyük nebi.	Feed us with the light of the Sublime , Let us die for your sake with zeal; The heart of “Sabâh” bleeds together With this fresh “hymn,” oh Abdülkadir...	Feed us with the light of the national ideal , Let us die for your sake with zeal; The youth’s heart bleeds together With this fresh hymn, oh great prophet.

* Sabahattin Ali devoted the original 1926 version of “Nefes” to Sufi mystic Abdülkadir Geylani, and then with a revision in 1931, he dedicated the poem to the national sociologist Ziya Gökalp. Bold text indicates the specific words that the author revised between the 1926 original version and the 1931 revised version of the poem.

The genetic and philological comparison between the 1926 avant-texte of “Nefes” and its 1931 published iteration reveals that Sabahattin Ali executed precise semantic recalibrations at the lexical level, deliberately transmuting mystical signifiers into nationalist ones. The structural spine of the poem—the refrain repeated at the end of each stanza—was originally directed at the twelfth-century Sufi mystic Abdülkadir Geylani as “ya Abdülkadir” (oh Abdülkadir). In the 1931 publication within *Atsız Mecmua*, this phrase was deliberately transformed into “ey büyük nebî” (oh great prophet). By applying the Islamic designation of absolute prophethood (“nebî”) to Ziya Gökalp, the prominent sociologist and formulator of Turkish nationalism, Ali astutely recognized and mirrored the cultic, sacralizing aspects of the early Republic’s political culture. In this environment, the reverence, awe, and absolute submission historically reserved for religious figures and spiritual guides were structurally transferred to the ideologues, founders, and intellectual architects of the nation-state.

Examining the internal dynamics of the first stanza reveals a corresponding shift in the relational posture between the lyrical subject and its object of veneration. The grammatical shift from the third-person distancing in the 1926 manuscript (“Kalplere serptiği”—From the sparks he sprinkled) to the intimate, second-person direct address in the 1931 publication (“Kalplere serptiğin”—From the sparks you sprinkled) forces the imaginary dialogue with Gökâlp into a much more direct, immediate, and submissive posture. Concurrently, the revision of the fourth [third in English] line from “Bir ilâh tanıyor” (recognize [...] as a deity) to “Bir mürşit, tanıyor” (recognize [...] as a spiritual guide) demonstrates the pragmatic limits and theoretical precision of this ideological construction. While rhetorically elevating Gökâlp to a “prophet” in the refrain to satisfy the nationalist fervor of the publication’s audience, the poet structurally avoids explicitly deifying him as a god (“ilâh”). Instead, he substitutes the Sufi-derived concept of “mürşit” (the spiritual guide or teacher of a dervish). This precise lexical choice aligns with Gökâlp’s historical role as the intellectual guide and sociological formulator of Turkish nationalism, serving as a conceptual bridge between traditional religious hierarchy and modern secular leadership.

Further ideological alignment occurs through precise phonetic and conceptual substitutions. In the second stanza, the standard Turkish word “gönlümün” (of my heart) is phonetically deformed into its Anatolian dialectal equivalent, “göynümün.” This deliberate morphological alteration represents a strategic alignment with the populist, vernacular-oriented linguistic discourse of the early Republic (see Aytürk (2008) for a detailed history of the Language Council’s activities). The language reform process during this era aimed to elevate Anatolian vernaculars, but more specifically, this phonetic shift catered directly to the ultra-nationalistic, purist linguistic discourse championed by *Atsız Mecmua*. Even more radically, the third stanza enacts a methodical conceptual overwriting of institutional religion. The original line, “Pak tarikatına giren bir kere” (Whoever enters your pure brotherhood once), is excised and replaced by “Milliyet aşkını duyan bir kere” (Whoever feels the love of the nation once). Through this substitution, the institutional religious structure (tarikât/tariqa) is structurally dismantled, and traditional religious devotion is explicitly transmuted into national belonging (milliyet aşkı), mirroring Gökâlp’s own Durkheimian project of sociologizing religion.

The final stanza completes this ideological synchronization and documents the deliberate conceptual erasure of the individual mystic subject. The divine concept of “ulviye” (the sublime) is replaced by “mefkûre” (the national ideal)—the fundamental sociological concept introduced to the Turkish political lexicon by Gökâlp himself to denote the unifying, transcendent purpose of the nation (Parla 1985; Berkes 1959; Mumyakhmaz 2025). Furthermore, the mystical pseudonym “Sabâh,” denoting Ali’s individual esoteric existence and personal spiritual journey, is purged entirely. It is replaced by the collective noun “gençlik” (youth), representing the idealized, homogeneous mass subject of the nationalist mobilization and the Kemalist revolution.

At this analytical juncture, a critical historiographical distinction must be made to engage fully with alternative readings of this textual transformation and to accurately situate the poem within the highly fragmented ideological landscape of the 1930s. Unlike later instances in his life—such as the coerced production of “Benim Aşkım” in 1934—there is no documentary evidence indicating that the official state bureaucratic apparatus directly mandated the specific lexical revisions of “Nefes.” Furthermore, it is a historical fallacy to read the 1931 revision of “Nefes” merely as a direct capitulation to the official ideology of the Kemalist state. As recent historiography demonstrates, while the early Kemalist regime readily adopted Gökâlp’s institutional blueprints regarding the subordination of religion, it actively marginalized his specific cultural formulations, particularly his “Turkish-Islamic Synthesis,” in favor of a strictly secular, ethno-civic nationalism (Çetinsaya 1999; Erşahin

2008). Gökalp's legacy was guarded not by the central state apparatus, but by divergent ultra-nationalist factions, primarily the intellectual circle surrounding Nihal Atsız and his newly established journal, *Atsız Mecmua* (Soğukömeroğulları 2013). Thus, dedicating a poem to Gökalp in 1931 was an alignment with a specific, highly partisan editorial mandate rather than a submission to central state orthodoxy.

Recognizing this contextual nuance requires a polyvalent hermeneutic approach to the text, engaging seriously with alternative scholarly interpretations. Previous scholarship has frequently interpreted the transformation of "Nefes" as a sign of genuine ideological oscillation, suggesting that Ali might have been sincerely experimenting with a nationalist idiom or undergoing a temporary change in political affiliation before his definitive turn to socialist realism (Korkmaz 1997, p. 50; Kara 2000, pp. 114–15). The primary source fueling this assumption is Nihal Atsız's 1940 polemical pamphlet, "İçimizdeki Şeytanlar" (The Devils Inside Us). Written to aggressively counter Ali's novel *İçimizdeki Şeytan* (The Devil Inside Us) (1940), Atsız sought to establish their ideological rupture by retroactively claiming that Ali had frequented the "Kızıl Elma" (Red Apple) room of the Turkish Hearths (Türk Ocakları) in 1926–1927. According to Atsız's narrative, Ali was supposedly inoculated with the nationalist ideal there and exhibited a sincere desire to write "milliyetperver" (patriotic) poetry (Atsız 1940, p. 4).

However, a rigorous examination of Ali's private transcripts, early literary output, and profound Sufi aesthetic background from the exact same era substantially challenges Atsız's retroactive claims of Ali's sincere nationalist phase. As established, some of Ali's early poems were deeply entrenched in classical Ottoman and Sufi terminology—specifically the rind-zâhid paradigm, evident in his 1925 and 1926 publications in *Çağlayan*. None of Ali's published works in prominent magazines like *Çağlayan*, *Servet-i Fünun*, *Güneş*, *Irmak*, *Hayat*, or *Meşale* between 1925 and 1929 contain symbolic or thematic evidence of an idealized, ethno-centric nationalism (Bezirci 2007; Özkırmı 2016). More decisively, his private correspondence and unpublished works reveal a deep, often satirical distance from the rigid dogmatism of his Turanist peers. In his 1928 travelogue, "Seyahatname-i Südlce", sent to his friend Mehpare Taşduman, Ali explicitly mocks Atsız's ideological rigidity. He refers to Atsız with the archaic, hyper-nationalist title "Nihal Mirza"—using the Timurid noble title "Mirza" to playfully undercut Atsız's self-appointed authority—and describes him ironically as the "Oğuz Beyi" (Lord of the Oghuz) who arbitrarily bestowed the rank upon himself (Laslo and Özkırmı 1979, p. 329). Furthermore, in his 1928–1929 classical composition "Terkib-i Bend," Ali caricatures Atsız's militaristic posturing, labeling him the "Hülâgu-yı zaman" (the Hulagu of the age) whose "Turkism is quite formidable" (Üzen 2019, p. 164). This historical juxtaposition strongly indicates that Ali viewed the dogmatic, ethno-centric nationalism of his immediate circle not as a profound personal conviction to be earnestly embraced, but rather as an object of literary satire.

Consequently, how should the 1931 revised version of "Nefes" be read? It cannot be dismissed merely as an absolute product of official totalitarian coercion, nor accepted as an authentic ideological conversion. Instead, genetic criticism demands that the text be evaluated within the specific material, relational, and political conditions of its production. This necessitates a polyvalent approach. The transformation of "Nefes" should be conceptualized through a simultaneous matrix: as an opportunistic editorial accommodation within the bounds of friendship, a pragmatic trial of a nationalist idiom, a highly strategic anti-communist alibi against a paranoid state, and a vehicle for concealed, Aesopian irony.

Firstly, the semantic shift in "Nefes" represents an acute instance of opportunistic accommodation driven by carceral isolation and the dynamics of literary friendship. In May 1931, incarcerated in Aydın prison on charges of spreading communist propaganda, Ali faced bureaucratic and geographical isolation. He urgently needed a conduit to the public

sphere to maintain his relevance and voice as an author. During this period, Ali and Nihal Atsız were not yet the bitter public adversaries they would become a decade later; they existed within a shared, albeit ideologically diverse, literary network. Stripped of access to leftist publishing venues, Ali utilized his close friendship with Pertev Naili Boratav, who acted as a crucial intermediary to facilitate the publication of Ali's work in *Atsız Mecmua*, as evidenced by their correspondence dated 13 January 1931 and 24 February 1932 (Sönmez 2020, pp. 74, 127–28). Atsız himself later corroborated this, admitting that he published Ali's stories and poems in the magazine primarily due to "Pertev's insistence" (Atsız 1940, p. 6). By cloaking his 1926 Sufi poem in the hegemonic vocabulary of Turanist nationalism, Ali pragmatically adapted to the stringent editorial mandate of *Atsız Mecmua*. In doing so, he opportunistically experimented with the nationalist idiom to guarantee publication, leveraging the literary vernacular of his friends to bypass the barriers of his confinement.

Secondly, and perhaps more crucially, this editorial accommodation concurrently functioned as a highly strategic political shield against the intensifying paranoia of the official state apparatus. It is a critical historiographical error to equate the ideology of *Atsız Mecmua* with the official ideology of the Kemalist state in 1931. *Atsız Mecmua* was established specifically to defend Gökâlp's legacy following the closure of the Turkish Hearths, serving as a bastion for a divergent, ultra-nationalist faction (Soğukömeroğulları 2013). Simultaneously, the state was drastically escalating its suppression of leftists. Following the brief and turbulent multi-party experiment of the Free Republican Party (SCF) in 1930, the state transitioned into a period of severe political contraction. The promulgation of the draconian 1931 Press Law (Matbuat Kanunu) and stringent amendments to the Penal Code actively criminalized class-based ideologies (Mazıcı 1996; E. Ç. Bulut 2020). Sitting in an Aydın prison cell accused of communist subversion, Ali needed an immediate political alibi to shed the perilous 'Bolshevik' label. By dedicating a poem to Ziya Gökalp—a figure marginalized by the state but undeniably recognized as an indigenous patriot and intellectual father of the nation—Ali constructed a sophisticated maneuver. He utilized the ultra-nationalist camouflage of his peers to signal to the prison censors and state authorities that he was embedded in the national ideal, rather than an internationalist communist threat. Thus, praising Gökalp was not a submission to official state ideology, but rather the deployment of an ultra-nationalist mask to deflect the coercive gaze of the state.

Finally, recognizing this text as an opportunistic accommodation and a strategic political alibi does not negate the presence of profound ironic distance; rather, the unchanged semantic residue within the poem serves as the compelling evidence that the nationalist armor was an instrumental veneer, leaving the text open to an Aesopian reading.

Despite the extensive lexical transmutations applied to the poem's exterior (zâhir), the foundational structural elements of the text remain remarkably intact. The lines dictating pure theological and ritualistic actions—the physical act of absolute prostration ("Başımız önünde geliyor yere"—Our heads bow to the ground before you) and the ecstatic willingness to embrace martyrdom ("Uğrunda ölelim biz de hevesle"—Let us die for your sake with zeal)—are identical in both the 1926 Sufi original and the 1931 nationalist revision. By preserving the subject's practice of religious prostration while merely substituting the object of worship (from the Sufi ghawth to the secular sociologist Gökalp), the text subtly, and deeply ironically, demonstrates how the political obedience demanded by both the exclusionary facets of the nation-state and its nationalist factions functioned as a mere structural replica of traditional religious subservience. Furthermore, retaining the title "Nefes" (Hymn/Breath) and utilizing the classical 6 + 5 syllabic meter fundamentally maintains the religious, ecstatic affect pulsating beneath the text's secular armor.

Within Lev Loseff's (1984) theoretical framework of censorship, the overt, enthusiastic praise of Gökâlp functions as the exoteric "screen" utilized to navigate both the immediate editorial constraints of *Atsız Mecmua* and the carceral surveillance of the state. Conversely, the rhythmic, mystical architecture and the preservation of the Sufi subtext serve as a "marker." This marker preserves the author's internal intellectual autonomy, leaving the text open to an esoteric, ironic reading (bâtın) by an informed audience aware of the poet's true intellectual lineage and his earlier exploration of the rind-zâhid dynamic.

4.3. Other Instances of Aesopian Subversion: *Rüzgâr* and *Esirler*

Ali's tactical pragmatism regarding political vocabulary and his acute awareness of carceral surveillance are further corroborated by another revealing revision in his poem "Rüzgâr" (Wind). This poem was also published in *Atsız Mecmua* during his imprisonment, precisely one month prior to the publication of the revised "Nefes." The verse, as it appeared under the scrutiny of the prison and the nationalist editors in 1931, read as follows (Ali 1931):

*Kimi coşar din uğruna geberir, yalan;
Kimi gider şeref için can verir, yalan!
(Some rush headlong and die for their religion, a lie;
Some go and give their lives for honor, a lie!)*

However, the word "honor" (şeref) in the 1931 publication's second line was deliberately changed to "homeland" (vatan) when Ali subsequently included the poem in his first poetry book, *Dağlar ve Rüzgâr* (Mountains and Wind), published in 1934 after his release (Ali 1934b).

This lexical hesitation aptly encapsulates the dynamic of the hidden transcript. Unable to risk overtly critiquing the highly sacralized concept of the "homeland" while physically under the surveillance of the prison administration and relying on an ultra-nationalist journal for publication, the poet strategically hid behind the generalized, less politically volatile concept of "honor" as temporary, acceptable armor. Once the immediate carceral danger had passed and he had secured greater publishing autonomy, he reintroduced his true, highly subversive critical intent—explicitly mocking the willingness to die for nationalist constructs. Tellingly, Ali chose to include neither the original 1926 Sufi version nor the 1931 nationalist revision of "Nefes" in this 1934 collection, further indicating that he viewed the Gökâlp dedication as a temporary, situational maneuver rather than a permanent aesthetic or ideological commitment. Concurrently, his effort to translate an article concerning student movements and unrest in German universities (Sternthal 1931) in August 1931, while still incarcerated, strongly indicates that despite his severe physical isolation and his pragmatic use of the nationalist idiom, his critical consciousness and intellectual agency against authoritarian systems were indirectly, yet firmly, sustained.

This paradigm of tactical accommodation and deliberate internal subversion is further corroborated by the genesis and reception of Ali's theatrical play, *Esirler* (The Captives). Written primarily during his incarceration in Konya (1932–1933) and serialized in *Varlık* in 1935, the play's history provides revealing historical evidence of how Ali utilized the nationalist idiom as a strategic alibi while dismantling its ideological core from within.

The subject matter—the epic of the Göktürk prince Kür Şad is based on a 7th-century Eastern Turkic general under the Tang Dynasty called Ashina Jiesheshuai—was explicitly handed to Ali by Nihal Atsız. An undated letter sent by Atsız to Ali in Konya prison reveals a deliberate attempt to construct a nationalist shield to rehabilitate Ali's image and sever his ties with Marxist circles. Atsız urged Ali to finish the play to secure a "good reputation" (iyi bir şöret), assuring him that his inner circle knew it was not written out of

“sycophancy” (dalkavukluk), while specifically warning him to hide the text from Nâzım Hikmet (Sönmez 2020, p. 224). Pertev Naili Boratav’s correspondence from April 1931 corroborates this horizontal pressure, noting Ali’s initial reluctance to adopt this mandated “epic tone” (Sönmez 2020, p. 74).

While Ali adopted the exoteric “screen” of the Göktürk setting to secure publication and satisfy his friends’ demands for an alibi, he deployed a profound hidden transcript. Rather than portraying Kür Şad as the infallible, hyper-masculine military conqueror demanded by Turanist mythology, Ali infused the protagonist with psychological fatalism and romantic vulnerability, subtly injecting themes of class conflict.

The success of this Aesopian subversion is underscored by the furious reaction of the ultra-nationalists. Realizing his myth had been repurposed, Atsız wrote to Ali on 9 January 1937, threatening him half-jokingly with “100 beatings” (100 sopa) for his leftist leanings, and announcing his intent to write his own novel to restore the honor of the Kür Şad that Ali had “ruined” (berbat ettiğin). Crucially, Atsız complained that unlike Ali’s version, “Kür Şad there will not represent a [social] class” (Sönmez 2020, p. 337). The ideological rupture was finalized in Atsız’s 1940 pamphlet, where he publicly lamented his tactical error: “How could I have known he would turn the greatest hero in history into a weak-willed lover (iradesiz bir âşık)?” (Atsız 1940, p. 6).

Ultimately, the history of *Esirler* mirrors Ali’s broader carceral strategy. By adopting the historical subjects proposed by the right-wing intelligentsia, he successfully navigated censorship during periods of extreme vulnerability. Yet, by methodically stripping these hyper-nationalist myths of their exclusionary core, he preserved his intellectual autonomy, demonstrating a resilient subversion where the forms of the oppressor are adopted only to be dismantled from within.

5. The Endurance of the Hidden Transcript: Synthesizing Mysticism and Socialist Realism

5.1. Epistemological Continuity in Private Correspondence

The existing historiography examining Sabahattin Ali’s literary and intellectual trajectory is predominantly built upon sharp turning points and linear phases. According to prevailing academic consensus, the author’s intellectual biography is divided into two distinct compartments: a traditionalist, nationalist-inclined provincial phase influenced by classical Ottoman and folk literature prior to 1930, and a secular socialist-realist phase born from his contact with the *Resimli Ay* circle upon his return from Germany (Korkmaz 1997; Bezirci 2007). However, the linguistic remnants in his private letters, literary interviews, and fictional works, particularly those written in 1930s, compel a problematization of this narrative of linear rupture. Although largely overlooked in current scholarship, it is necessary to examine how the Sufi and classical vocabulary acquired in his early years functioned in conceptualizing, formulating, and shielding his later Marxist affiliation and social critique against censorship mechanisms. The author’s intellectual continuity can be reread not as a radical ideological oscillation, but as the adaptation of his existing conceptual toolkit to new social realities.

The first notable empirical trace of this conceptual continuity coincides with his periods of carceral isolation, when he was ideologically considered to be in one of his most radical positions. It is evident that Sabahattin Ali, who was arrested in Konya in December 1932 and subsequently transferred to Sinop Fortress Prison, did not sever his intellectual ties with the world of Sufi thought even within this oppressive environment. In a letter written from prison to Ayşe Sıtkı (dated circa April 1933), he recounts the relationship he established with a fellow inmate who had completely devoted himself to mysticism, performing his prayers while reading dense theological and mostly Sufi texts such as *Mevahib-i Ledüniyye*,

Tefsir-i Tebyan, and Mehmet Hanefi Cengi. In the letter, Ali notes that when alone with this inmate, they discussed the “philosophical aspects” of the Quran and read about the minor and major signs of the apocalypse (“*alamet-i suğra*” and “*alamet-i kübra*”) from an old book with yellowed pages. The most striking emphasis, however, lies in the author’s own position: “In some places, I had to give him Sufi explanations [*tasavvufi izahatler*] because his general knowledge was quite lacking. . .” (Ali 1997d, p. 68). Ali’s ability to respond with structural “Sufi explanations” to the inmate’s questions regarding why God manifested to Moses on Mount Sinai (Tur Dağı) primarily as fire rather than in another form demonstrates that his knowledge of classical theology was not a passing whim. This reveals that the language sought out by an intellectual—punished by the state on charges of subversive leftist propaganda—in his moments of carceral solitude, or the language he utilized to establish intellectual superiority, still harbored the hermeneutic layers of Sufism.

The core philosophical and literary debate crystallizes in the author’s intense correspondence with Ayşe Sıtkı following his imprisonment, particularly in September 1934. While openly articulating his engagement with the Marxist and socialist realm of thought in these letters, Sabahattin Ali surprisingly resorts to a mystical terminology to express his reception of this new ideal. The expressions he uses in response to Ayşe Sıtkı’s desire for dedication necessitate a literary excavation:

“Lenin, whose wife you wish to be, was not a human but a colossal idea, and this idea is still alive today, perhaps even more vividly. . . Only, the motivators of the desire to lose oneself [*gaip etmek*] within such an ideal should not be romantic dreams. . . but the joys, which are not granted to everyone, of seeing the truth and fighting for the truth” (Ali 1997e, p. 240).

While the verb *gaip etmek* (to lose/*kaybetmek*) belongs to the standard everyday lexicon and lacks inherent Sufistic content, its conceptual application here—the desire to lose one’s individual ego entirely within a colossal, absolute ideal—structurally resembles the Sufi theological station of *fenâ* (annihilation of human attributes and perishing in the absolute), newly transposed into a secular and revolutionary context.

More importantly, there are the specific words Sabahattin Ali chose when describing the process of Marxist awakening—that is, the masses stripping away capitalist illusions to reach objective truth:

“I have seen with my own eyes: The astonishment of those who had stood with their backs turned to the truth purely due to their ignorance in this matter, when they begin to see everything, and their ecstasy [*gaşy*] and joy [*sürur*] after understanding everything. . .” (Ali 1997e, p. 241).

Evaluating this terminology requires navigating the liminal space between broader Ottoman idiom and Sufi technical usage. It is well documented that Sabahattin Ali frequently utilized a heavier, more traditional Ottoman vocabulary in his private correspondence to articulate complex emotional states, a register distinct from the simpler, everyday Turkish of his published poems and stories. Consequently, the word *sürur* used here functions strictly within the broader idiom as a standard expression of joy, devoid of specific mystical connotations. The word *gaşy*, however, occupies a more complex, liminal position. While it is a rarely used word that can denote an overwhelming delight in standard literary usage, it concurrently carries a profound Sufistic residue. Within the scope of the book *Istîlâhât-ı Sofîyye fî Vatan-ı Asliyye* (Glossary of Sufi Terminology Concerning the Primordial Abode), *gaşy* is defined by Safer Baba (1926–1999) as the servant completely detaching from worldly bonds and the external realm, falling into a swoon before the absolute manifestation of the Truth (Hakk), and reaching a state of ecstasy (*vecd*) to the point of losing consciousness (Dal 1998, pp. 79–80). Because *gaşy* exists in this liminal semantic space, forcing its appearance

here into a single, definitive category of deliberate Sufi coding would be reductive. Instead, it opens the door to interpretative moderation rather than acting as hard empirical data.

However, his advice in the same letter urging Ayşe Sıtkı to develop her mind in a single direction and try “to see the universe, the world, and people with their true identities and faces” (Ali 1997e, p. 240) signifies a desire to tear away masks and penetrate the esoteric (*bâtin*), the true essence of things. This advice could suggest that Sabahattin Ali’s early literary formation later became available as a conceptual repertoire; he could have recognized *zâhir-bâtin* dichotomy—which he had explored for theological and aesthetic reasons in his poems such as “Mey” and “Gazel” in *Çağlayan* magazine between 1925 and 1926—as a suitable, pre-existing mold for conceptualizing the Marxist theory of false consciousness and historical materialism.

It can be argued that this epistemological framework also influenced the way the author evaluated his networks of political friendship and enmity. Ayşe Sıtkı’s critique in her letter dated 11 August 1934, where she criticizes the political atmosphere in Ankara by stating “the six arrows pierce one pitifully there,” and then asks Ali, “If you were the Minister of Education, how would you gather your companions. . . Everyone is your companion. You soften instantly at anything. And if you made an effort, you would even bring the faithless [*imansızlar*] inside” (Sönmez 2020, p. 257), renders the rigid boundaries of the author’s inner world visible. Sabahattin Ali, in his reply dated 8 December 1934, states that he is unimaginably “stubborn” on important matters, rejecting Ayşe’s claim that he would “bring the faithless inside”:

“I do not desire to stand face-to-face with the faithless and fight, or even to fall out with them, but I do not take them to my bosom either. If the opportunity arises, I would annihilate them all. . . Without even breaking my acquaintanceship. . . For example, Nihal [Atsız]. . .” (Ali 1997e, p. 229).

The characterization of “faithless” here and the desire to “annihilate” his old friend Nihal Atsız “quite naturally, without harboring any grudge or anger” necessitates critical analysis. At first glance, this harsh rhetoric of annihilation might appear as a partisan and rational ideological purge maneuver, consistent with the phrase “my Marxist historical perspective” (Ali 1997f, p. 275) explicitly mentioned in one of his future letters dated 15 April 1935. The selection of the word *‘imansız* requires similar contextual parsing. In the broader Ottoman–Turkish colloquial idiom, *imansız* figuratively functions as a standard superlative denoting a ruthless individual. However, within the specific structural context of this letter—where Ali targets the nationalist milieu’s dogmatic rigidity—the term can be interpreted conceptually as bridging this everyday idiom with the classical *zâhid* paradigm: it accuses those who rigidly adhere to external, chauvinistic forms (*zâhir*) of remaining completely blind to the underlying truth (*bâtin*). In Ali’s eyes, Atsız and the extreme chauvinist militarism he represented were captives of a false delusion, described in Ayşe Sıtkı’s letter as “feelings that, when considered individually, are easily seen as base and ugly to the point of foolishness, changing color when socialized and becoming lofty feelings” (Sönmez 2020, p. 257). Ali states that the shell of these false ideals has long been scraped away and their debris thrown in the face of the world, characterizing the nationalists who fail to see this as “fat-bellied blind pigs and foolish camels walking with their heads in the air” (Ali 1997e, p. 229). This sense of distinct moral superiority and the attitude of accusing the external dogmatic world of blindness align with Marxist ideology, but they also share a structural parallelism with the *rind*-like literary stance that exposes the falsity of the *zâhir* world (public nationalist posturing).

5.2. Fictionalizing the Mystical: Sufi Affects in Socio-Realist Prose

The most striking illustration of this hidden transcript—namely, that classical literary baggage and a socio-realist mission could coexist—is found in the author’s literary statements published in 1935 and his subsequent fictional works. In October 1935, while actively producing within socialist circles, he responded explicitly to a survey question: “There was a time I was very keen on aruz meter; I would write ghazals, terkeb-i bend’s, and voraciously read the classics, working over them. Today, the ones I still read, and love are Fuzuli and Galip Dede” (Aygün 1935, p. 57). Addressing these two apex figures of classical Ottoman literature—Fuzûlî, the 16th-century master who championed the sincere, divine love of the rind against the dogmatic rigidity of the zâhid, and Şeyh Galip, the 18th-century Mevlevi sheikh renowned for his profound Sufi metaphysics—is a declaration that he did not experience a radical break from his aesthetic and intellectual roots. This underlying affinity was already evident in his pre-1930 poem “Mesnevi,” composed during his melancholic days in Germany. In this classically structured piece, Ali engages with these figures not merely as historical models but as spiritual companions. He explicitly invokes Fuzûlî (“Fuzûlî-i elem-hâl”) as a partner in his sorrow and Şeyh Galip (“Galib-i sühan-kâr”) as a masterful confidant who shares his emotional burden (for the classic poem see Özkırımlı 2016, pp. 148–49). By calling upon these historical authorities of mystical suffering, Ali utilizes the classical Divan framework as a sanctuary to articulate his own modern sense of isolation and inner turmoil. Even in this period of maturity, where he argued that art should be a kind of “propaganda” aimed at “elevating people to the better and the more beautiful” (Reşit 1936, p. 264), Ali maintained the principle that “art benefits from everything that has been and will be” (Aygün 1935, p. 57).

This theoretical and aesthetic continuity was translated onto a fictional plane in his magnum opus, the novel *Kuyucaklı Yusuf*, which he began serializing while in Konya prison in 1932 and published as a book in 1937. While the novel generally depicts the socio-economic impasses, bureaucratic decay, and class conflicts of Anatolian town life with a harsh realism, it sets the stage for a dhikr ritual at the Kadiri lodge as one of the rare scenes that “breaks the town’s monotony and gloom”. In the description of a Thursday evening when Yusuf (the protagonist) began to engage with city life through “positive or negative relations”, Ali pens the following sentences:

“Because there was a dhikr at the Kadiri tekke tonight... [children] pushing and shoving each other, they would approach the windows and look at the ‘howling’ (hünküren) dervishes... Among them were some privileged and well-behaved children who were permitted to enter the dervish lodge with their fathers and even, at times, to join in the dhikr. While these [children], in an ecstasy (gaşy) and spiritual attraction (cezbe) they did not understand, swayed from side to side with the full elasticity of their bodies...” (Ali 2020, p. 25).

The use of the expression “howling dervishes” (“hünküren dervişler”)—a phrase rarely found in dictionaries, implying the chanting of the “Hû” dhikr by provincial dervishes—demonstrates Ali’s familiarity with the language of local religious practices. However, what is even more critical is his description of the state the “privileged” children experienced at the lodge as “an ecstasy [gaşy] and spiritual attraction [cezbe] they did not understand” (Ali 2020, p. 25). The word gaşy, which he chose in his 1934 letter to Ayşe Sıtkı to describe the intellectual awakening experienced by those attaining Marxist historical consciousness, is reproduced in this 1937 socio-realist novel to depict the moment children detached from the world within the Kadiri lodge (the order of Abdülkadir Geylani, to whom the author dedicated his initial 1926 poem “Nefes”). Because gaşy and cezbe are deployed here to describe an authentic tekke ritual, it confirms Ali’s explicit awareness of their

specific Sufistic connotations, supporting the interpretation that he knowingly navigated the polysemic and Sufistic residues of his vocabulary.

This literary overlap cannot be read with a sharp claim that “Ali was defending the lodges,” because he maintains his realist distance by adding that worldly desires were not erased, noting that immediately after this moment of ecstasy, the children cast hazy glances toward the lattice of the women’s section. Nevertheless, this scene illustrates that the author’s early Sufi vocabulary and affective molds integrated into his mature realist prose, functioning as one of the fundamental aesthetic resources he relied upon when depicting social reality.

Consequently, the continuity of Sabahattin Ali’s hidden transcript is a critical arena of debate that rejects labeling him either as a static Sufi or a dogmatic Marxist. Within the oppressive environment of the early Republican era, which sought to homogenize the cultural heritage and silence dissident voices through carceral isolation, Sabahattin Ali neither experienced a unidimensional ideological oscillation nor completely surrendered to the molds presented by the state. On the contrary, the author possessed a systematic application of Aesopian language, refined by a centuries-old literary tradition (Divan and Sufi poetry). While he could produce the nationalist or hagiographic language demanded by the state or the editorial outlets of the period on the external surface (*zâhir*) as a performative survival maneuver; on the inner layer (*bâtın*), within his private letters and between the lines of his fictional world, he maintained his intellectual autonomy, his Marxist dedication, and his social critique beneath the protective armor of a polysemic vocabulary. He strategically navigated the boundaries between deliberate Sufi technical usage, classical literary motifs, and the broader Ottoman–Turkish colloquial idiom (expertly leveraging the liminality of polysemic terms like *gaşy* and *cezbe* depending on their context, while also utilizing vernacular expressions such as *imansız*). This circumstance demonstrates that intellectual-state relations and literary production under censorship in the early Republican era possessed a much more complex, negotiated, and resilient structure than linear narratives of rupture suggest.

6. The Architecture of Coercion: “Benim Aşkım” and the Public Transcript

While Ali successfully maintained his intellectual autonomy in his private correspondence and later socio-realist prose, his public-facing bureaucratic struggles during the early 1930s required a distinctly different strategy. The starkest example of textual concession and ideological co-optation occurred following Ali’s second arrest in December 1932. Accused of satirizing state administrators in a poem titled “Memleketten Haber” (News from the Homeland), he received a 14-month sentence, serving time in Konya and Sinop prisons before being released under the 1933 tenth-anniversary general amnesty. However, his physical release did not end his bureaucratic exile; his civil service record was erased, and his appointment as a teacher was blocked due to his classification as a communist dissident.

To secure economic survival and social rehabilitation, he was required to petition the Ministry of Education (Maarif Vekaleti). Although the Directors’ Council (Müdüriyan Encümeni) resolved, on 10 December 1933, to assign him to a non-teaching role, Minister Hikmet Bayur explicitly vetoed the decision, decreeing that “unless it is proven that he has changed his old mentality and state of mind, his employment is neither right nor permissible” (Ali 1997b, p. 172). During subsequent personal meetings, Bayur insisted on a tangible document demonstrating Ali’s ideological rehabilitation and directly asked him to “write a piece” (Ali 1997b, p. 172). Ali diagnosed this administrative paranoia in his private correspondence, describing the Minister as an “unconscious tool” who harbored no personal animosity but was paralyzed by systemic fear, demanding documented conformity to protect himself (Ali 1997b, p. 172).

Ali's unwavering insistence on regaining state employment, rather than pursuing alternative livelihoods, prolonged his bureaucratic suspension and exacerbated his psychological distress. Enduring approximately six months of forced idleness and humiliating visits to ministry corridors, he expressed his profound alienation in a letter: "I feel that I am shrinking before my own self (...) I have reached the end of the sacrifice I can make from my personality. I guess I cannot shrink any further for a stomach" (Ali 1997c, pp. 173–74).

It was within this context of systemic marginalization that the state utilized literature as a formalized apparatus for self-censorship. The institutional demand structurally reduced the modern republican writer to the position of a traditional Ottoman court poet, forced to compose a panegyric (*kaside*) to the sovereign to avert punishment and secure patronage. Recognizing this stark reality in early 1934, Ali wrote to Ayşe Sıtkı regarding the ministry corridors: "If I write a panegyric, they will appoint me" (Ali 1997c, p. 173). Ali's direct confrontation with Bayur—"Are you asking me to write a second poem?" (Ali 1997a, p. 168)—lays bare the administrative reality of the era, functioning as a direct acknowledgment of how the state utilized literature as a formalized apparatus for self-censorship and ideological surrender.

Consequently, Ali was coerced into publishing the poem "Benim Aşkım", dedicated directly to Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, in *Varlık* magazine on 15 January 1934. Yet, even while drafting this mandatory hagiography, Ali employed a semiotic strategy that highlighted the ideological extremity demanded by the state (Ali 1934a).

Gönlüm yüz sürmek ister yalnız senin katına

Senden başka her şeyi bir mangıra satıyor.

(...)

Kısacası gönlümü verdim Ulu Gazi'ye

Göğsümde şimdi yalnız onun aşkı yatıyor

(My heart wishes to rub its face only at your presence

It sells everything but you for a copper coin.

[...]

In short, I gave my heart to the Great Veteran

Now only his love lies in my chest.)

The deployment of phrases such as 'rubbing one's face at your presence' (*katına yüz sürmek*) exemplifies the intersection of literal religious veneration and classical literary inheritance. Etymologically and practically, the phrase originates directly from the physical act of religious prostration and absolute submission at a sacred threshold (*makam* or *dergâh*). Historically, this inherently religious imagery was systematically incorporated into the *Medhiye* (classical panegyric) tradition to elevate the padishah (monarch). By employing this language alongside phrases denoting an ecstasy that rejects all worldly goods ('selling for a copper coin'), the lyrical subject merges the formal requirements of a political panegyric with the absolute submission (*fenâ*) felt by a disciple toward a spiritual guide or God in Islamic mysticism. Mirroring the mechanics of the early poem written for Geylani, the lyrical subject here renounces the world entirely for the "love" of the power figure, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk ("Ulu Gazi"—the Great Veteran). Elevating the founder of the nation-state to the theological position of a mystical figure like ghawth (the highest spiritual authority or helper) or the *al-insân al-kâmil* (the Perfect Man) demonstrates how Ali tactically mirrored the extreme ideological reverence demanded by the state's sacralized apparatus to secure his survival.

By writing, “If I subtract you, my life ends before it begins” (“Seni çıkarsam, ömrüm başlamadan bitiyor”), the poet conceptually ties his very existence to the presence of the sovereign power. This operates as the twentieth-century Turkish equivalent of historical recantation literature (palinode), akin to the survival texts produced during Renaissance inquisitions or early modern state purges.

By conditioning his bureaucratic survival on a public, affective performance of devotion to the founding figure, the state’s demand itself functioned as an act of political sacralization. The regime did not merely require legal obedience; it demanded a civic liturgy of repentance. However, interpreting “Benim Aşkım” as a genuine ideological conversion—where the carceral system successfully conquered the author’s inner convictions—ignores the duality of human resistance. The chasm between the absolute, esoteric submission in “Benim Aşkım” and the realistic, rebellious tone found in a private letter Ali wrote contemporaneously to his friend Ayşe Sıtkı—stating, “One or two scoundrels with whom I had a falling out brought this upon me. . .” (Ali 1997d, p. 71)—aligns closely with James C. Scott’s anthropological theory of transcripts. The juxtaposition of these documents strongly indicates that the published poem is not an expression of authentic belief, but a calculated, performative survival maneuver executed by an intellectual under the immediate threat of permanent bureaucratic marginalization. By producing the required ‘public transcript’ to satisfy the state’s demand for ideological reverence, Ali secured the necessary bureaucratic reinstatement to continue his true intellectual work in secret. The success of this performative survival maneuver is historically supported by the fact that merely three years later, in 1937, Ali openly published his seminal socialist-realist novel *Kuyucaklı Yusuf* in installments in a left-leaning newspaper. This demonstrates not the unmitigated coercive capacity of a totalitarian regime, but rather a successfully negotiated survival strategy within an authoritarian state that accepted performative compliance in exchange for socio-economic reinstatement.

7. Discussion

The textual, epistolary, and biographical evidence presented in this study necessitates a fundamental reevaluation of how intellectual dissent, aesthetic continuity, and state coercion are conceptualized within the historiography of the early Turkish Republic. By moving beyond teleological narratives of a *linear rupture*—which have long compartmentalized Sabahattin Ali’s career into discrete, disconnected traditionalist and Marxist phases—this research reveals a profound epistemological continuity. The findings demonstrate that the collision between the dissident intellectual and the newly sacralized nation-state did not result in the total erasure of classical literary forms, but rather in their subversive adaptation.

The primary theoretical implication of this study lies in its synthesis of James C. Scott’s “hidden transcripts” and Lev Loseff’s “Aesopian language” with the indigenous Islamic hermeneutics of the *zâhir* (the external, superficial form) and the *bâtın* (the concealed, esoteric truth). The genetic criticism of Ali’s poetics—from the mystical ghazals of the 1920s to the carceral revision of “Nefes” in 1931—illustrates that the classical Ottoman *rind-zâhid* dichotomy, though originally a theological construct, later became available as a rich repertoire, providing a highly sophisticated architectural blueprint for modern political evasion. The *zâhid* (the dogmatic enforcer of external rules) seamlessly transitioned into the paranoid Kemalist censor or the ultra-nationalist editor, while the *rind* (the possessor of inner truth) became the persecuted Marxist intellectual. By utilizing this traditional theological framework, Ali did not merely invent a new code; he mobilized an entire historical epistemology of dissimulation to protect his intellectual autonomy. This finding fundamentally enriches Scott’s theory of resistance, demonstrating how deeply rooted

cultural and theological paradigms can be repurposed to construct a resilient hidden transcript under modern secular authoritarianisms.

Furthermore, analyzing Ali's coerced productions—specifically the panegyric “Benim Aşkı” and his strategic utilization of nationalist mythos in the play *Esirler*—exposes the precise, transactional anatomy of coercion within the early Republican state. Drawing upon Emilio Gentile's framework, it becomes evident that the Kemalist regime operated in a liminal space between civil and political religion. The state's bureaucratic apparatus did not possess the mass violence of interwar totalitarianisms, which sought to annihilate the dissident body entirely. Instead, the Turkish state's repression in the 1930s was distinctly performative and transactional. Minister of Education Hikmet Bayur's explicit demand for a “written piece” as a condition for Ali's reinstatement underscores a regime that prioritized the public liturgy of submission over genuine ideological conversion. By forcing the intellectual to adopt the conceptual posture of *fenâ* (annihilation of the self) in devotion to Atatürk, the state successfully extracted its public transcript. Yet, as Ali's private correspondence from the same period suggests, this coerced hagiography was a calculated maneuver for socioeconomic survival. The state's reliance on this performative compliance reveals an underlying systemic apprehension that sought validation through the very intellectuals it marginalized. By settling for the public transcript of ideological rehabilitation to grant civil service reinstatement, the state unknowingly allowed the hidden transcript of intellectual autonomy to persist offstage, and its Aesopian counterpart to survive between the lines.

Most critically, this study disrupts the core assumptions of classical secularization theory as applied to socialist-realist literary production. The prevailing historiographical assumption that an intellectual's conversion to Marxism requires the total abandonment of religious vocabulary is contradicted by Ali's epistolary and novelistic output. His deliberate deployment of a polysemic lexicon demonstrates a highly complex affective continuity. By utilizing a liminal term with deep Sufistic residue like *gaş* to conceptualize the Marxist awakening in his private letters, to conceptually map his political rivals onto the dogmatic *zâhid* archetype, and subsequently activating the explicit Sufi meanings of both *gaş* and *cezbe* in his socio-realist prose, Ali suggests that rather than discarding the sacred, he relocated it. The transcendent devotion, the pursuit of absolute truth, and the structural critique of hypocrisy traditionally found in Islamic mysticism were dialectically synthesized with historical materialism. This indicates that in societies undergoing rapid, state-imposed secularization, traditional theological vocabularies often remain the most potent linguistic reservoirs available for expressing radical modernities, profound ideological devotions, and socio-political awakenings.

8. Conclusions

The intersection of genetic criticism, political anthropology, and historical sociology reveals that the literature of the early Turkish Republic was not merely a reflection of state-sponsored modernization, but a primary arena for ideological survival. The textual history of Sabahattin Ali's poetics and prose demonstrates that authoritarian states, in their drive to sacralize their authority, inadvertently compel dissident intellectuals to develop highly sophisticated mechanisms of camouflage. By mobilizing the classical *zâhir-bâtin* dichotomy as both an internal epistemological framework and an external shield, Ali successfully navigated carceral isolation and bureaucratic extortion, deploying Aesopian language to simultaneously satisfy the disciplinary demands of the Kemalist state and preserve his radical social critique.

Ultimately, the historiographical implications of this research extend far beyond the single figure of Sabahattin Ali. By pivoting the scholarly focus from elite dissidents who

successfully and genuinely reintegrated into the state apparatus to a vulnerable, methodically targeted intellectual forced into micro-negotiations for physical survival, this study illuminates the granular realities of censorship. If literary historians evaluate a society or an era solely by the public transcript—accepting coerced panegyrics or tactically altered manuscripts as authentic ideological shifts—they risk inadvertently validating the mechanisms of historical censorship, finalizing the erasure that the disciplinary state initially attempted. Recognizing the resilience of the hidden transcript forces a rigorous reevaluation of the early Republican literary canon. The coerced literature produced under the threat of the carceral system stands not as a testament to the triumph of the state’s coercive civil religion, but as an enduring indicator of the palimpsestic resilience of the marginalized intellectual—demonstrating that even under the gaze of the nation-state, the inner truth of the text remains autonomous.

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Note

- ¹ Our research has yielded no results regarding the publication venue of the poem “Nefes”. Based on the accounts of Arslan (2016, p. 24), it is known that the date of composition was 1926. It is further documented that Sabahattin Ali entrusted his classical poems, such as “Terkib-i Bent” and “Şarkı,” to his friends for safekeeping upon his imprisonment (Bezirci 2016, p. 16). However, there is no available information concerning the poem titled “Nefes.”

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