



To Read Yashar Kemal

ISTANBUL'S MIASMA

by Nicholas S. Ludington*
The New York Times -

YASHAR KEMAL, Turkey's and perhaps the Islamic world's best living writer, again demonstrates his skill at braiding dramatic action with popular myth in *The Sea-Crossed Fisherman*. It is an intensely political book, its vision framed sometimes as beautifully written stream-of-consciousness dreams and sometimes as messages Samuel Goldwyn would have said were better sent by Western Union.

Mr. Kemal, once an official of the banned Turkish Workers Party, flies the political flag of the idealistic left. Right-wing policemen discuss exterminating millions of Turks to "purge the noble blood of the Turkish nation." Leftist youths who, dueling murderously with their right-wing counterparts, brought Turkey close to civil war in the late 1970's (*The Sea-Crossed Fisherman* was first published in 1978), are praised for "doing something about" social injustice. The author, who is of Kurdish descent, refers to this minority's unsuccessful struggle for autonomy.

The Sea-Crossed Fisherman is a less confident effort than the best of Mr. Kemal's books, *Memed, My Hawk* and *The Wind From the Plain*, set in a mythical locale in his native Cukurova Plain, an acknowledged debt to William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County. But it is a first-class novel of the developing world and gives us the miasma and the magic of Turkey's largest city, Istanbul - its decadence and its exotic pleasures, like the tiles of Rustem Pasa Mosque, "a spangled rainbow of seven thousand colours."

For the first time, too, Mr. Kemal inserts himself into his work as an unnamed character, a writer of books, an outsider who observes and narrates. He is a friend and fishing companion of the title character, Fisher Selim from Menekse, a seaside village being engulfed by urban sprawl. Selim usually smells of fish and is dusted with scales, and he is aloof from his fellow man: "so cruel, so hateful to each other, cheating, killing, enslaving, destroying... hearts never stirred, never beating warmly like a bird's for a lover, for a faithful face."

Selim seeks men "who are not ashamed of weeping freely like a morning shower, of laughing sunnily like an almond orchard in bloom." Wounded long ago in army service, he has dreamt of a flaxen-haired nurse ever since, imagining she waits for him to build them a dream house along the Bosphorus. In the meantime, he prefers the company of the dolphins in the Sea of Marmara.

The book opens with a murder in a Menekse coffeehouse. Zeynel, an orphan boy who grew up exploited and maltreated by the villagers, shoots Ihsan, a bodyguard at a house of prostitution and a gangster. In chapters alternating and contrasting with the story of Selim, Zeynel leads the inept police on a chase through Istanbul's mosques, neighborhoods and underworld.

While Selim is on the sea, "a rippling expanse of blinding blue sparks that filled you with joy and made you long to sail away to its very limits," Zeynel huddles in a boat on the Golden Horn, a once glorious inlet of Istanbul's harbor that has become a cesspool and a symbol of ecological disaster within a city "perishing in a noisome stench of decay, a swiftly disintegrating aged city . . . crawling with millions and millions of maggots."

The inhabitants of Menekse, feeding on the newspaper fabrications typical of Turkey's sensationalist press, create a myth of Zeynel. But it is Selim who kills the villainous Halim Bey Veziroglu, one of Mr. Kemal's all-bad bad guys who started his fortune by murder and drug-smuggling, now exploits the poor in factories, speculates in real estate and, for his only amusement, deflowers virgins. V EZIROGLU also instigates the slaughter of the Marmara dolphins beloved of Selim. In order to make a fast buck in dolphin oil, the fishermen shoot, dynamite and harpoon the "shrieking" fish, hack them apart and boil the chunks in huge cauldrons. Near-crazed by the massacre, Selim begs the fishermen to stop, saying the sea will be cross and will yield up no further catches.

This incident produces the awkward and misleading "sea-crossed" in the title, marring an otherwise brilliant translation by Mr. Kemal's wife, Thilda. "The Sullen Sea" would do better justice to the Turkish title (*Deniz Kustu*), where the verb carries the multiple meanings of "angry," "hurt," "not speaking." Thilda Kemal successfully recreates the author's prose, faithful even to the excesses of his color-packed, descriptive style and relentless imagination. [S]