

Lost in the Freeplay of Signifiers: A Derridean Analysis of “Loving Tülsü” by Aziz Nesin

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Abstract Aziz Nesin, a prolific intellectual in Turkish literature, is known as a poet, a novelist, a playwright, and also a short story writer. Nesin wrote over two thousand short stories for which he gained a worldwide recognition. He has been regarded by many critics as a great master of humor and satire. Nesin’s work is thought to shed light on a turbulent phase in Turkish Republican period from the establishment of the multiple-party system (1945) to 1990s. In his stories, Nesin usually explores the relationship between the individual and socio-political system, and he foregrounds conflicts stemming from the socio-political disorganizations and inefficiency of the bureaucratic system. Political hypocrisy and bourgeois morality also come to the fore as his target of satire. On the other hand, a thorough analysis from a Derridean vantage point enables one to approach some of Nesin’s stories on a different layer of reading as with his subversive attitude, Nesin goes beyond exploration of the individual-system conflict in some of his stories and creates a space for the freeplay of language. “Tülsü’yü Sevmek” (“Loving Tülsü”) is one of Nesin’s short stories which appeared in his short story collection titled Yetmiş Yaşım Merhaba (Hail to my Seventieth Year), first published in 1984. The story is about a man who tells everyone he meets that he loves Tülsü, although he does not exactly know who Tülsü is. A traditional, reading of the story might lead to a Platonic analysis in which Tülsü stands for the ideal love. In this respect, Tülsü may be regarded as the transcendental signified while various women stand for shadows which refer to the ideal concept of Tülsü. On the other hand, a double reading reveals that Tülsü stands as a signifier which keeps its status as a signifier all through the story, and does not refer to any transcendental signified. Throughout the story, Tülsü as a signifier corresponds to an empty locus, however, it functions well to create intersubjectivity. Looking at some of Derridean ideas might prepare the ground to see better how the word Tülsü functions

as a floating signifier. This study aims to analyze Nesin's "Loving Tülsü" and expose how it proceeds through the dissemination of signifiers and problematizes the Platonic assumption of signified in signification process.

Key words Aziz Nesin; Turkish Literature; short story; Derrida; freeplay

Aziz Nesin (1915-1995), one of the outstanding writers of twentieth-century Turkish literature, always voiced the unvoiced of his community and, in the process, revealed the deeper recesses of the collective consciousness from different vantage points. Nesin wrote many important works in a variety of genres, but was best known for his short stories. A prolific short story writer, not only did Nesin make significant contributions to Turkish short story heritage, but he also gained worldwide recognition with his more than two thousand short stories. His stories, marked by a skillful command of humor and satire, are still widely read, being as relevant today as they were written. Talat Halman, a prominent literary critic in Turkish literature, features Aziz Nesin as "Turkey's best satirist ever" who dominated satirical fiction from the 1960s onwards (88). Halman further explains that "[h]is immensely popular short stories have inspired people to coin such expressions as 'straight out of Nesin' and 'almost as funny as a Nesin story'" (217).

Critical studies, made on Nesin's stories so far, have chiefly been confined to thematic analyses with their emphasis on humor and satire that Nesin used while exploring and revealing the various conditions of individuals entrapped in a stifling bureaucratic mill, bourgeois morality and political hypocrisy. To give a case in point, Kemal Karpat notes that Nesin is "a prolific and gifted writer of humorous stories with a sharp eye on human frailties", and he "ridicules the incompetent bureaucrat, the pompous politician, and the superficial intellectual, as well as social injustice in all its manifestations" (502). On the other hand, a thorough analysis from a Derridean vantage point allows the reader to approach some of Nesin's stories on a different layer of reading, since Nesin goes beyond the exploration of individual-system conflict in some of his stories, and creates a space for the freeplay of language in a subversive fashion. This study aims to analyze one of Nesin's short stories "Tülsü'yu Sevmek"¹("Loving Tülsü") in the light of some Derridean theories, and explore how the story epitomizes the dissemination of signifiers in the freeplay of language.

"Loving Tülsü" is about a man who makes it his business to love a woman named Tülsü, and announces it to people around him at every opportunity; but as it will soon be revealed, to the reader's surprise, he does not actually know who Tülsü is. Tülsü resists any attachment to any fixed identity throughout the story. Remaining as an eternal signifier within the story's universe, Tülsü corresponds to an empty locus, thereby problematizing the Platonic assumption of signified in signification

process. In this context, a brief theoretical background about some Derridean concepts might provide a basis before exploring the function of the word Tülsü as a floating signifier.

The concept of the *freeplay of language*, put forward by Derrida, suggests an attempt to transcend the Platonic binaries which form the basis of western philosophical tradition, or metaphysics of presence as Derrida called it. Platonic binary system implies a system of thought that is grounded in the assumption that each and every signifier ultimately leads to a transcendental signified, an assumption which insistently foregrounds one leg of binary, and tends to keep the other leg in the background. As Arthur Bradley puts it, "binary logic of oppositions and hierarchies is the product of a very questionable series of decisions: why, for example, has the masculine been historically deemed to be more real, present or authentic than the feminine?" (7). In the same line of thinking, Derrida also asserts that the Western philosophical tradition is logocentric in that it "always assigned the origin of truth in general to the logos" (*Of Grammatology* 3). *Logos*, in a Derridean context, refers to "a point of reference, a fixed origin" ("Structure, Sign" 149). Derrida further argues that all the metaphysical determinations of truth are more or less immediately inseparable from the instance of the logos, or of a reason thought within the lineage of the logos (*Of Grammatology* 10).

The modern linguistic distinction between signifier and signified is closely related to the assumptive binary opposition between sensible and intelligible worlds (Bradley 45). Derrida discusses this relation in several of his writings. In *Of Grammatology*, for example, he states that "[t]he linguistic 'science' cannot hold onto the difference between signifier and signified without the difference between sensible and intelligible...As the face of pure intelligibility, it [sign] refers to an absolute logos to which it is immediately united" (99). In a similar fashion, in "Structure, Sign, and Play", he argues that the traditional concept of sign has always been considered and determined as a relation between a signifier and a signified, that is, a signifier referring to a signified, signifier different from its signified (152). Obviously, Derrida challenges the metaphysical relationship between signifier and signified, as he states: "There is no transcendental or privileged signified and...the domain or the interplay of signification has, henceforth, no limit" ("Structure, Sign" 151). Hence, according to Derrida, language consists of dissemination of signifiers, existing in an incessant process in which a signifier leads to another signifier, rather than a final signified which encircles the meaning. "There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language" (*Of Grammatology* 7), and "the absence of the transcendental signified extends the

domain and the interplay of signification *ad infinitum*” (“Structure, Sign” 151).

Derrida points to the fact that no linguistic sign evades the freeplay of language, and there is not any single sign which happens to be pure and unmediated, which invalidates the concept of *origin*: “In this play of representation, the point of origin becomes ungraspable. There are things like reflecting pools and images, an infinite reference from one to the other, but no longer a source, a spring. There is no longer a simple origin” (*Of Grammatology* 36). Defying the existence of a simple origin, Derrida introduces the concept of *trace*. From a Derridean perspective, every sign retains the traces of other signs, and every sign is related to every other. Consequently, the meaning of every sign is dependent on the traces of other signs that differ from it in both space and time.

Against the background of all Derridean ideas discussed so far, it turns out that Aziz Nesin’s² “Tülsü’yü Sevmek” opens itself to a Derridean reading with its numberless references to Tülsü, a woman who never appears in the story, creating a space for the freeplay of signifiers. The story consists of a letter from the narrator to a friend of his, explaining the reason why he has send him a telegram message prior to that letter, saying “I love you, Tülsü” (9).³ The narrator writes retrospectively in the letter that one night he goes to a cheap restaurant for a drink, where he ends up sharing a table with a stranger in his seventies. To start a conversation with the stranger, the narrator asks him about his occupation, and the man says that he loves Tülsü. The narrator thinks that the man has misunderstood him, so he repeats his question to receive the same answer once again. Seeing the narrator’s astonishment, the man goes on to explain himself: “Is there any other business in the world more serious than loving someone else? I have loved Tülsü so far, and I will be loving her till I die” (9). While the conversation develops, the narrator attempts to learn in vain who Tülsü is, getting gradually more baffled and confused each time the man talks about Tülsü.

Tülsü does not refer to one single woman, but to all women the man has met in different periods of his life, an inference which reminds the reader the Platonic forms. Thus, a traditional reading of the story most probably ends up in a Platonic analysis which would regard Tülsü as a transcendental signified-the symbol of ideal love-, while considering various other women shadows which refer to that ideal concept of Tülsü. Very suitably, another Turkish short story writer, Adnan Özyalçınır comes up with such a Platonic reading: “Tülsü is a dream woman. A woman emancipated from all the negative aspects of other women in the author’s life”(57). However, a double reading might well reveal that Tülsü is not a transcendental signified, or to rephrase it in Derrida’s words, “not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions came into play” (“Structure, Sign” 151).

Tülsü refers not to a signified or a fixed locus, but to a space in which the man

enjoys his existence, as it is confirmed by the very words of the man: "You know, each and every person has a different reason for being. Mine is my love for Tülsü. I can exist as long as I love Tülsü" (11). The man then attempts to tell the narrator when he saw Tülsü for the first time. Yet, his memories are very hazy, most of which becoming confused with those of his father:

I remember the first time I saw Tülsü only from my father's anecdotes. One day, we were sitting in the shop of a friend of my father on a hill by a rough sidewalk. My father says that a girl passed by the shop. She was a long-haired girl, around fourteen or fifteen years old. I became fascinated, and said I would marry that girl. My father told that incident so many times that I came to believe that I really saw her, and that girl turned into a real being. (9)

His accounts reveal that Tülsü is not a pure and unmediated sign, but an intertext, consisting of the man's and his father's vague memories. As Barry Stocker points out, "[p]lay is the repetition, substitution and contextuality of the sign that can never be said to be simply absent or present, and the same applies to anything in the experienced world" (186). Stocker's statement draws attention to the loss of an absolute origin as in the case of Tülsü. The boundaries between fact and fiction blur in the man's mind, or he willingly comes to accept the *assumed* status of the signified.

Hearing the man's descriptions of Tülsü, the narrator deducts that Tülsü must be an old woman at that very moment:

-So she must be over her 80s, said I.
 -Why do you think so?
 -If she was fifteen years old when you were four or five...
 -Tülsü never gets older.
 -So you mean that you saw her afterwards?
 -I have been looking for her for years. Why do you think I am here? Tülsü is a woman who lives in a city somewhere in the world unknown to me, and sure she is waiting for me. I know I will find her one day. (9)

The narrator has a glimpse of the man's experience through the perspective of linear temporality and causality. It is for this reason that he fails to figure out loving Tülsü is not an end in itself, but a process which the man enjoys being a part of. The man, being unable to freeze the flow of signifiers, pursues a kind of riddle that does not necessarily demand to be solved. The word "Tülsü"⁴ literally means a piece of tulle which is floppy and slick creating a floating look without a solid substance. Thus,

the word itself contributes to the creation of the sense of floating signifiers. A piece of Tulle resists having a permanent shape, just like Tülsü resists belonging to a permanent identity.

The man further tells the narrator a series of incidents when he caught a glimpse of Tülsü in several different places of the world: When he was thirty years old, he happened to see Tülsü in a metropolitan area as a girl with short brown hair in her twenties. Ten years later, he saw Tülsü near the bank of the Danube River. She was a blonde girl with blue eyes at that time, nearly twenty-five years old. After a couple of years, he met Tülsü to find her as a princess of a far eastern country. Another time, Tülsü turned out to be a beautiful black woman. These incidents are reminiscent of the Derridean idea that every sign retains the traces of the other signs against which it is to be defined, in other words, in order to have any meaning at all (Allen 220). There is always a dissemination of signifiers which keep the traces of other signifiers. Likewise, Tülsü has traces of a variety of different women, without being fully identified with any of them.

The function of Tülsü in the story might also be interpreted as the epitome of another Derridean concept, *différance*. Derrida agrees with Saussure's argument that meaning is the product of the differential relations between signifiers. However, he goes beyond Saussure in claiming that signifiers are always deferred from reaching any absolute meaning. In *Speech and Phenomena*, he argues that "the movement by which any language, or any code, any system of reference in general, becomes 'historically' constituted as a fabric of differences" (141). *Différance* means both 'to differ' (in the sense of distinguishing or differentiating something from something else) and 'to defer' (in the sense of delaying or postponing something to a later point in time) (Bradley 70). To analyze the story in this context, there are various Tülsüs, all are different from each other, but still have each others' traces. Nevertheless, Tülsü does not correspond to any of those women. As Abrams puts it, there is no ground, in the incessant play of difference that constitutes a language, for attributing a decidable meaning, or even a finite set of determinately multiple meanings to any sign (57). Accordingly, Tülsü as a signifier neither signifies one single woman nor equals to the whole women the man has met, while occupying a *surplus* status. As Derrida suggest, all language displays *surplus* over exact meaning, and the linguistic sign always outruns and escapes the sense which tries to contain it (Eagleton 134).

The narrator wonders why the man never stops pursuing Tülsü despite the fact that he found her many times in the past, as he has told so. The man then explains that he found Tülsü only in momentary instances:

- I am always in search of Tülsü while years are passing.

-But, you do find her.

-Yes, I do, but how? It is an instance like the flash of a lighting, which suddenly flares up just to fade away in a split second. I lose her as soon as I find her, which does not mean a reunion at all. (11)

Derrida argues that “[f]reeplay is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain” (“Structure, Sign” 152). Tülsü always escapes a signified; hence the man’s reunion with her is always deferred. The man describes those moments as materialized like a flash, a detail which brings to mind the Derridean assumption that “freeplay is always an interplay of absence and presence” (“Structure, Sign” 152). Thus, in this freeplay, “there is a continual flickering, spilling and defusing of meaning” (Eagleton 134). The man’s inability to put an end to the movement of signifiers does not discourage him at all, in fact, the opposite happens: the flight of the signifiers stimulates his Desire even further.

In a Derridean context, language is not transparent, representative or referential, as it always stands for a lack or an absence. As Brenda Marshall states, “[l]anguage doesn’t represent the world; it is not a moment of simultaneity. Rather, language stands in for presents, something that is not present. Language functions in the space of absence” (69). Language functioning in the space of absence might explain the man’s persistence of mentioning Tülsü:

“I talked to you about Tülsü. Now, you know that I love her. I want to make the whole world know that. In the past, I used to go to the countryside or to the woods to cry out, ‘I love you, Tülsü’. I used to hear the echo of my voice. Shouting always in the same manner was not so good, so from time to time, I used to change the word order and the tone of my voice”.

He began to shout, like he did in the woods, but this time in a lower tone so that other people in the restaurant would not hear him:

-Tülsü, I love you

-I love you, Tülsü.

-I do love you Tülsü. (11)

The man resorts to language to fill the space created by the absence of Tülsü as a transcendental signified or a center. In such a context, language both adds to the dissemination of signifiers and becomes a substitute as “[w]hen the center-the transcendental signified- is never present, then language becomes the movement” (Marshall 69). This might also reveal why the man sends telegraphs to random

addresses:

- I send telegram messages to Tülsü from the post offices of different places I visit.
- So you know her address.
- No, how can I know? I send them to random addresses
- It means then that messages are sent back to you when they do not reach Tülsü.
- I think so, but they do not find me, either. My address is also a fake one. (12)

The man persistently adds more to the flying signifiers with those telegram messages which substitute for the absence of a stable and permanent meaning. They never reach Tülsü, nor do they turn back to the man. Therefore, the binary opposition between the lover and the beloved is eliminated as well, for neither the lover nor the beloved holds fixed positions, and they act as spaces for the freeplay of signifiers.

The story concludes with the narrator's decision to join this play, which is why he has sent such a strange message to his friend:

When you received my note, you probably got puzzled, and wondered the meaning of it. I know that writing such a note was not something a sane person could do; anyway I cannot say that I was totally sane when I sent that note to you. (12)

Eventually, the narrator achieves to go beyond the traditional conception of language as the ultimate representation of reality. Instead, he sends an empty signifier to his friend in the form of a note that does not signify anything for his friend, an act which defies the sense of origin and telos in the metaphysical space of signification.

In conclusion, it appears that Aziz Nesin creates a space for the freeplay of signifiers in "Loving Tülsü". Tülsü is not categorized or situated in linear temporality. In the course of the story, it metamorphoses into a space in which signifiers never lead into a final signified. Tülsü carries traces from different women, while the flow of signifiers never comes to an end. Loving Tülsü is an enjoyable ontological process for the man, which rejects any rational categorization and principles of linearity and causality.

Notes

1. "Tülsü'yü Sevmek" is the first story of Nesin's short story collection titled *Yetmiş Yaşım Merhaba (Hail to my Seventieth Year)*, first published in 1984.
2. Here it might be interesting to mention the ambivalent status of Aziz Nesin's own surname, since

it resists signifying a specific familial origin. Aziz Nesin was named Nusret by his parents before the enforcement of the Law on Family Names. Nusret remained undecided of his family name to be adopted after the enforcement of the Law. In the meantime, everybody would ask him in curiosity, “Nesin?” (What are you? What family name have you adopted?). Consequently, he decided on “Nesin” as his family name (Shaikh 3). Thus, his very surname acted as a signifier without referring to a signified.

3. Translations are the author’s

4. Tülsü literally means *tulle-like* in Turkish.

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