

Chapter 14

The Ecophobia/Biophilia Spectrum in Turkish Theater

Anatolian Village Plays and (Karagöz-Hacivat) Shadow Plays

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Anatolian village plays and shadow theater reveal both the celebration of the union between Anatolian people and the physical environment and the ways in which such material entanglements are contingent on an ethics of power and control over the natural world. Village plays and shadow theater also rely on early rituals for their form and content. These early ritualistic performances indicate the dependence of the social life on agricultural and meteorological events, representing such themes as the well-being of the livestock, revival and decaying of the flora, and blessings on the newborn, both human and nonhuman. Such themes coordinate in these plays with popular celebrations of the coexistence of humans and other species in Anatolia (the region now known as Turkey). However, these ritualistic plays celebrating natural events are also at times deeply anthropocentric in their use of the theme of union with the environment. Evolving from ritualistic village plays, Turkish shadow theater similarly shows conflicting attitudes toward the natural environments helping us see very different sets of relations with more-than-human habitats. These complicated representations within different sets of relations reveal ecophobic undercurrents embedded in some of the *Karagöz* plays.

Officially accepted as an Intangible Cultural Heritage asset by UNESCO in 2009, *Karagöz* plays are puppet plays, which are performed with only their shadows (cast on a white cloth) visible to the audience (see figure 14.1). In these plays, *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* are stock types, or cartoon symbols that represent the multiplicity of İstanbul's culture. With his round face, curly beard, bald head, and black eyes (black-eye in Turkish is *Karagöz*), *Karagöz* always provokes laughter, while *Hacivat* with his pointed beard and refined

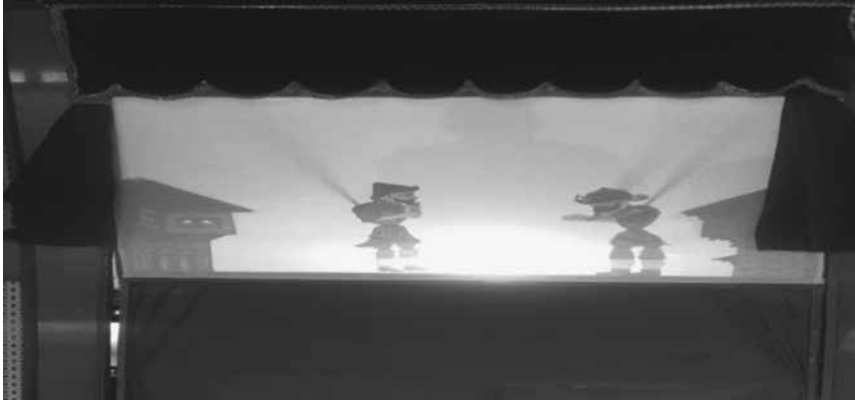


Figure 14.1 Karagöz and Hacivat, taken by Zümre Gizem Yılmaz Karahan. Ankara/Turkey. 05 May 2019. *Source:* Photo by Zümre Gizem Yılmaz Karahan.

language pleases the upper classes. Hacivat recites poems and displays his knowledge of music, gardening, and elite culture. Karagöz speaks the language of common people and appears to be a simpleton, but he is the one who deceives Hacivat. Moreover, while Hacivat is a reflective character calculating his next move, Karagöz acts impulsively, behaves rashly, and is more energetic. In other words, Hacivat represents the status quo and established moral principles, but Karagöz stands for tactlessness and new ideas. Therefore, Karagöz has to endure jokes and the threats of drunkards. One of the best Karagöz performers, Emin Şenyer (2015), writes that

in essence, Karagoz is a rich cross section of Turkish culture, namely, of poetry, miniature painting, music, folk customs, and oral tradition. So then, all these elements merged and fused in the early preparatory years of the sixteenth century to result in what is today known as Karagoz. By the seventeenth century, Karagoz was wholly identified. The name of Karagoz, as well as of kukla which in Turkish means a -puppet-, appeared for the first time in the seventeenth century. (n.p.)

The plots of these shadow plays are often episodic, which change with each performance according to the reactions of audience. The puppet master also changes these episodes when he wants to portray a certain custom or when he wishes to parody a particular trade or tradition in keeping with what he thinks the audience would most enjoy.¹

Inspired by the wit of two real people, Karagöz plays found a unique stage during the Ottoman Empire in many coffee houses, gardens, and public places as entertainment. These plays are still important in guiding people—especially children—on various topics, including environmental ethics.

Therefore, Karagöz plays deserve critical analysis in terms of what and how they narrate certain topics.

Forming the skeleton of shadow theater, traditional Anatolian village plays are folk performances that include simple drama comprising songs, dances, imitations, and mimicry. According to theater scholar Metin And, there are several possible sources for these village plays: they may have “originated in the shamanistic rituals of the Ural-Altaic region, which was the birthplace of the Turkish people[;] . . . [they may have been] part of the folklore of the Phrygian or Hittite civilizations of Anatolia” and may have derived “from festivals honoring such gods as Dionysios, Attis and Osiris[;] . . . or [they may have come] from the Egyptian mysteries celebrated in Eleusis and other places” (1975, 9). These crude plays “invite humanity to nature” (Şenocak 2016, 2:249)² and prioritize environmental issues and ecological cycles on the one hand and, on the other, try to control natural spirits for the betterment of society. This effort to control nature, in itself, however, is certainly not ecophobia: it illustrates how people have used more-than-human nature to “have positive influences on the ecological cycle” by intervening into “the ecological phenomena” (Çetin 2006, 190). Birds make better their lives by using more-than-bird materials also, and this is not ecophobia. To be clear: simply using the environment is not ecophobic.

Ecophobia is part of a spectrum condition. As explained in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, it

can embody fear, contempt, indifference, or lack of mindfulness (or some combination of these) towards the natural environment. While its genetic origins have functioned, in part, to preserve our species, the ecophobic condition has also greatly serviced growth economies and ideological interests. Often a product of behaviors serviceable in the past but destructive in the present, it is also sometimes a product of the perceived requirements of our seemingly exponential growth. Ecophobia exists globally on both macro and micro levels, and its manifestation is at times directly apparent and obvious but is also often deeply obscured by the clutter of habit and ignorance. (Estok 2018, 1)

According to Elizabeth Parker and Michelle Poland,

ecophobia has . . . proven to be an incredibly productive concept. Scholars have . . . been busily investigating the connections between the depredation of the environment and other oppressed groups, as well as exploring the extent to which certain structures and systems—international capitalism, for example, and forms of environmental colonialism—are driven, in part, by a contempt for a world that inevitably cannot be controlled. (Parker and Poland 2019, 10)

Parker and Poland are careful to avoid sophomoric interpretations of ecophobia, since, clearly, using/exploiting aspects of the natural world, controlling things in it, and fearing threats it presents do not necessarily fall under the rubric of ecophobia. Rather, the term describes an overarching ethical stand toward nature and natural things. Discriminating against a woman isn't necessarily sexism, but discriminating against a woman *because* she is a woman is. As sexism describes a worldview, so too does ecophobia. As a spectrum condition, ecophobia sits opposite to biophilia.

The concept of "biophilia" has been one of the sunnier ideas about how humanity fits into the world, but in the final wash, it just doesn't work as a model for understanding human/environment relations. The term originates with the German-born psychoanalyst and social philosopher Erich Fromm, who uses it in *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness* to describe a "passionate love of life and all that is alive" (1973, 365). In a wide-ranging discussion of what motivates human cruelty and aggression, Fromm argues that

biophilic ethics have their own principle of good and evil. Good is all that serves life; evil is all that serves death. Good is reverence for life, all that enhances life, growth, unfolding. Evil is all that stifles life, narrows it down, cuts it into pieces. (1973, 365–366)

As an opening gambit, this is a good beginning, a literal translation of "bio" and "philia," but Fromm's definition does not contain any notion of the neuropsychology of science. This had to wait a decade before Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson would further develop the term "biophilia" in 1984. Wilson defines it as "the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes" (1984, 1), "the urge to affiliate with other forms of life" (1984, 85), "the connections that human beings subconsciously seek with the rest of life" (1992, 350), and he hypothesizes that there are genetic bases for biophilia. It is a reasonable hypothesis, and it is reasonable also to hypothesize that there must be genetic bases for ecophobia. Studies have shown, for instance, that fears of snakes and of darkness are evolution-based.³ At what point a rational fear becomes a phobia is not within the scope of this chapter to address, but there *is* a point at which such a thing happens, and when it does, we are dealing with ecophobia. When we tell our young children, therefore, that there is no rational basis for being afraid of the dark, or of bees, or of spiders, or of bugs, or of dogs, or of any of the other things of which young kids are normally afraid, we know that we are not being entirely truthful with them. These fears are not ecophobia, but they can certainly lead into it. Novels, films, and other narratives that exploit these fears, that nurture and coddle them, and that magnify and pervert them to sell a story or a product or a politician: that's ecophobia. Evolutionary biologists have long speculated about the genetic

roots of both our affinity with and our acrimony to nature, and ecocritics have been quick to fix on biophilia as a tenet of environmental salvation. In addition to being unproven (and perhaps unprovable), the biophilia hypothesis alone cannot account for the realities of the world, for the kinds of things that are going on in the world, the factory farms, the rainforest destruction, the biodiversity holocaust, and it cannot make (or, at least, has not yet made) productive connections with theories about exploitation, about people who gain while others (human and nonhuman) foot the bill, or about intersections among ecophobia, homophobia, speciesism, and sexism.⁴ Complicating matters on the ecophobia/biophilia spectrum, as Karen Thornber (2012) has suggested, is the fact that something may be both ecophobic and biophilic at the same time. Thornber calls this ecoambiguity.

The Anatolian plays reveal what seems innocent enough: a desire “to increase the fertility of the soil and to ensure that the animals reproduce in a healthy environment and in many numbers” (Özhan 1999, 109); pursuit of better and more abundant crops and softer climates; and satisfaction of human desires. On the surface, these plays point to an Anatolian environmental consciousness in their celebration of the embeddedness of elemental cycles into daily lives, but we must ask to what degree there is a kind of ecoambiguity at play in how anthropocentrism trumps the environmental imperatives of the drama.

Most village plays either portray nonhuman animals as central figures or employ animal disguises—including those of “camels, horses (sometimes as hobby-horses), bears, mules, wolves, turtles, eagles, hedgehogs, pigs, foxes, storks, rats, partridges, rabbits, cats, deer, gazelles” (And 1999, 23) and, in the process, mark important cultural dates in relation with natural cycles. *Koç Katımı* is a good example and represents “a kind of sheep wedding . . . celebrating the pairing of a sheep and a ram. . . . Festivals after the birth of the sheep are known as *Saya* or *Saya Bayramı*” (And 2012, 23). Similarly, *Sayakutluğu* celebrates “the first day of the sheep pregnancy” (24). The names of months—Offspring pouring (*Döl dökümü*), Flower month (*Çiçek ayı*), Rain month (*Yağmur ayı*), Harvest month (*Orağ ayı*), Wine month (*Şarap ayı*), Ram pairing (*Koç katımı*) (And 1970, 20)—also seem to reveal the embeddedness of the elemental cycles in daily life and show a clear reverence for the nonhuman world. Yet, at the same time, these plays also categorize those forces as volatile, mysterious, and even threatening. To a degree, the dramatic yearning for control over nature conflicts with an acceptance of nature’s agency, producing a site of conflict on the ecophilia/ecophobia spectrum, and it is a productive site in that it reveals an ambivalent relationship with nature that characterizes much of human history.

Despite its potential usefulness as an analytic tool, “ecophobia” is a term that (like any other term) runs the risk of being misunderstood and misused.

Karagöz plays offer a good starting point on this topic. These plays are full of human-animal transformations that extend the capacities of human powers and reject human limitations and identity. While “imagining that we are not bound by the Earth’s finiteness and metabolisms” (Estok 2018, 11) can certainly be a symptom of ecophobia, there is much more to it than that. Transformation into a god or a donkey isn’t, in itself, ecophobia. In *Cazular* (Witches; *cadılar* in modern Turkish), for example, because of a disagreement between two lovers, each person demands his/her witch mother transform the other into an animal. After Karagöz rides the bewitched ass-female lover, the witch mother also punishes him and transforms him into an ass. Trying to save Karagöz with the help of magic, Hacivat himself turns into a goat. Making fun of Karagöz’s nonhuman shape, Hacivat makes a contrast between Karagöz’s and his new form: “Thank God, I am an acceptable animal, I am not an ass like you!” (Kudret 2004, 1:302). The transformations in this scene (and consecutive dialogues) serve the humorous belligerence of the main characters, and the use of nonhuman animals sharpen the cultural difference between Karagöz and Hacivat. We witness here dehumanizing representations that may or may not signal a larger ethical position of contempt or disregard toward nonhuman animals—and *that* would be ecophobia. While the shapeshifting scenes serve as allegories of different social status, they are not, in themselves, ecophobia. For a man to dress up as a woman on Halloween isn’t misogyny and people simply dressing up as animals is neither speciesism nor ecophobia. While the co-emergence of human and nonhuman corporealities in Karagöz (half-human and half-donkey) and Hacivat (half-human and half-goat) suggests a loss of power, there is comedy rather than a larger, overarching ecophobia at play here. What the plays do reveal, however, with the donkey being beaten all the time and dying of hunger and Hacivat the goat being butchered for its meat, is a violent speciesism that really only takes form as a potential critique when the suffering is corporealized in human (or half-human, as it were) form. To come back to the man dressed as a woman: if he is carrying a sign that says “Rape me,” then clearly the cross-dressing is far from innocent and is obviously misogynistic. The assumptions of the Karagöz-Hacivat plays—that donkeys may be beaten and starved or that goats may be butchered for food—are, indeed, speciesist.

Even when there is apparent equality between people and animals—for example, when Karagöz in *Tahmis* (*Coffee Grinders*) refers to his donkey as a brother (Babadoğan 2013, 154)—the donkey is clearly not an equal and retains its value as a commodity. When it dies, Karagöz asks, “Where are his front and back feet? I will go nuts now! (*He turns it.*) Buddy, what is this? . . . Oh, I got it. That guy clamped it in the wrong way. This is no good use for me anymore” (Kudret 2004, 1052). We see here what Brian Deyo (2019) characterizes as efforts “to efficiently mobilize . . . energies to exploit nature”

(446)—in this case, the donkey. Brother or not, however, the donkey remains a commodity. A person surely wouldn't cut off the feet of a deceased real brother.

A similar disdain for animals stands out in many other Karagöz plays. One example is *Balık* (*Fish*), in which Karagöz goes fishing for dinner but ends up haunted and hunted by a huge monster fish. As a brutal creature that devours Karagöz, the monster fish overturns Karagöz's boat in the end. A sequel to *Balık*, *Balıkçılar* (*Fishermen*) takes up the same story. The play starts with Karagöz's hunting, catching, and then releasing of a mermaid. In the play, Karagöz is humiliated by a seal, a crab, and a swordfish, respectively, and the monster fish reappears attacking Karagöz, uttering threats of gobbling him up and swallowing his boat. Karagöz can only escape from the evil fishes by retreating into his house:

KARAGÖZ: How chatterer you are! Get the hell out! (*Karagöz hits the monster with the shovel.*)

(*Monster attacks and swallows half of the boat.*)

KARAGÖZ: (*Frazzled and exhausted, flees for home*) Oh no! I was nearly heading for the last roundup! Tough escape it was! (Kudret 2004, 212)

So he disturbingly fails in hunting sea creatures, which turns into a crisis of identity. Karagöz feels threatened by the fishes and faces the loss of his superior identity. Nevertheless, he re-establishes his cultural identity at home by breaking his bonds with Nature, which he labels as unknown, evil, and monstrous, hence a source of anxiety. Narrating monstrosity is narrating a kind of ecophobia by imagining unpredictable agency in nature, agency that must be subject to human power and discipline. The play narrativizes ecophobia here and villainizes nature and nonhuman beings by imagining monstrous beings in the wilderness (in the heart of the sea in the play). Although Karagöz strenuously tries to affirm his human identity against sea creatures, the "monster" fish prevents him from controlling the fishes. Yet, fearing a huge fish that is trying to eat us is, per se, hardly what we would call ecophobia; imagining that the huge fish is a freaky monster trying to eradicate humanity. Ecophobia is an antipathy to the physical environment, and this antipathy can have many causes, many of which grow out of relationships that have gone bad between humanity and nature.

Shadow plays often acknowledge the material codependence of human and nonhuman with composite figures that tacitly "transgress the outline of human" and put "forces, substances, agencies, and lively beings that populate the world" (Alaimo 2011, 282) on par. These plays also use such figures to indicate humanity's dependence on nonhuman nature and conflicted entanglements with such nature. As the *göstermelik*⁵ images transfigure cultural

meanings dislocated from the human and relocated in human-nonhuman intra-actions, they call into question the validity of human agency. They further prompt us to think that the colocation of human and nonhuman is catastrophic, hence reconstituting human-nonhuman enmeshment through fear and terror. Sometimes this means imagining evil in Nature, as with the bewitched tree in *Kanlı Kavak (Bloody Poplar)*, resulting in what Deyo calls an imagination of “nature as a ‘fickle’ antagonist, pitted against ‘heroic’ humans in a navel-gazing melodrama of our witless devising” (2019, 445). Certainly if ecophobia demonstrates “a crisis of identity as a crisis of environmental embeddedness” (Estok 2011, 13), then ecophobia is visible as Karagöz digresses from his full agentic capacity to the loss of his cultural identity—to a poplar tree. He turns into something that cannot be categorized; therefore, he needs to redraw his own definition as a human being. He unfortunately does so by cutting the tree with a cultural product (axe) at the end of the play. In this way, he affirms his identity separated from Nature, hence resettling order. Karagöz takes the tree home to use it for fuel in winter. In this respect, the hostile projection of other-than-humanness helps Karagöz establish his cultural identity which he deliberately separates from natural environments. By doing so, the play employs “the seductive narrative of human triumph in the war against nature” (Hartman and Degeorges 2019, 457), thereby exemplifying a war against any environment that supposedly threatens the existence of human beings.

Some Karagöz plays market ecophobia by imagining a threatening environment—sometimes a malicious tree, sometimes a monster fish—that would punish anyone attempting to destroy the natural order. Correlating a tree with the djinn, a source of fear in Islamic belief, is an example of how Karagöz plays strategically market ecophobia. Such marketing ecophobia offers “visions of apocalypse” and shows how “we entertain ourselves with stories of our own vulnerability before forces which we perceive as profoundly—indeed, lethally—violent toward our very existence” (Estok 2013, 91). Here, ecophobia becomes anthropocentric entertainment, depicting a wounded human (Karagöz) triumphing against the venomous forces of nature by breaking his ties with the nonhuman nature, hence furthering the gap between body and mind, outside and inside. In this sense, ecophobia demands consideration as a force that ignites anthropocentric fantasies framing a fragile human armed with the intellect vis-à-vis the forces of Nature. At least part of what is ecophobic in these plays is the attribution of evilness to nature.

Evolving from ancient ritualistic and dramatic village plays, Turkish shadow theater appears to highlight the union between the natural and the cultural while at the same time reinforcing the superiority of the cultural removed from the natural. This creates a problem, since these plays reveal conflicting attitudes toward nature, hence complicating human-nonhuman

relations. Nature sometimes emerges as an unpredictable and threatening force, which causes an identity crisis for Karagöz. Clearly, to imagine nature as evil and as an opponent to be conquered for the sake of civilization is to open up possibilities for continued ecophobic ethics. Shadow theater offers complicated stances toward the natural world, sometimes offering images of harmonious unions with nonhuman beings and things and at other times systematically reinforcing the idea of Nature as an object of fear and terror. Within this framework, Karagöz plays need a thorough revision for resettling the humanity's relation to the natural environments.

NOTES

1. For more detailed information, see Emin Şenyer's website "Karagoz and Hacivat: Traditional Turkish Shadow Theatre." <https://www.karagoz.net/english/shadowtheatre.htm>.
2. Throughout this chapter, all the Turkish sources are translated by Z. Gizem Yılmaz Karahan.
3. See Roach, References.
4. This paragraph appears in *The Ecophobia Hypothesis*, pp. 8–9.
5. Traditionally, some screen ornaments called *göstermelik* are cast on the screen at the beginning of each play to give an idea about the subject matter of the upcoming play, and slowly disappears with the music of Nareke (a kind of whistle with shrill sound) and Tef, a frame drum also known as Daf (Babadoğan 2013, 69).

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