Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri, and **Wilson, Brett M.** (Translator and Editor). 2023. *Nur Baba: A Sufi Novel of Late Ottoman Istanbul*. London: Routledge. 136 pages. 7 B/W illustrations. ISBN: 9781032463926.

Reviewed by **Gianfranco Bria**
Roma Tre University
gianfranco.bria@uniroma1.it

This book presents the first-ever English translation of *Nur Baba*, one of Turkish most renowned novels, written by Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu (1889–1974) in the early 20th century. The novel follows Nigâr, a young and beautiful yet dissatisfied aristocratic woman from Istanbul, who becomes involved with a Bektashi Sufi community in Istanbul. Frustrated by her absent diplomat husband and the monotony of family life, Nigâr falls under the influence of Nur Baba, a charismatic but manipulative Bektashi sheikh ('Sufi Master'). She is drawn into a world of drinking, drugs, and sexual excess, mirroring the novel's broader critique of moral decay in Ottoman society. The story is narrated by Macid, Nigâr's cousin, who acts as both an observer and moral compass, attempting to allegedly save her from Nur Baba's corrupting influence.

Karaosmanoğlu's depiction of Nur Baba's Bektashi *tekke* ('Sufi lodge') – portrayed as a place of indulgence and debauchery – parked controversy upon the novel's initial publication in 1921, igniting debates about Sufism's role in Turkish society. Through this lens, *Nur Baba* offers a rich exploration of class, gender, and morality during the late Ottoman and early modern Republican periods. It reflects the tensions of the Second Constitutional Period (1908–1918), during which nationalist and modernist ideologies clashed with traditional religious and social structures. While critiquing the moral decline of Sufism, the novel also expresses a nostalgic fascination with its spiritual heritage. As such, *Nur Baba* remains a valuable resource for understanding the socio-cultural transformations of the late Ottoman Empire, particularly regarding gender roles and societal norms.

Brett M. Wilson, a scholar specializing in Sufism and Islam in the late Ottoman period, has undertaken the translation and editorial work for this edition. Motivated by the growing academic interest in Ottoman Sufism, Wilson has translated Nur Baba into English for the first time. The novel has previously been translated into several languages, including German,[1] Italian,[2] Spanish,[3] Serbo-Croatian,[4]

1 Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri. 1947. *Flamme Und Falter. Ein Derwisch-Roman.* Edited and translated by Annemarie Schimmel. Gummersbach: Florestan.

2 Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri. 1945. *Nur Baba*. Edited and translated by Rossi Ettore. 1945. *Nur Baba*. Roma; Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri. 1995. *Nur Baba*. Edited and translated by Bellingeri Giampiero. Milano: Adelphi.

3 Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri. 2000. *Nur Babá*. Edited and translated by Salom Alín. Barcelona: Destino.

4 Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri. 1957. *Nur Baba*. Edited and translated by Fetah Sulejmanpašić. Sarajevo.

Diyâr, 6. Jg., 1/2025, S. 194–198, DOI: 10.5771/2625-9842-2025-1-194

Greek[5] and Slovak.[6] Originally serialized in the newspaper *Akşam* in 1921, *Nur Baba* was first published in Ottoman Turkish and later in modern Turkish, following the language reform. Wilson's approach to translation is meticulous, preserving the novel's historical and linguistic nuances. He worked directly from the original Ottoman Turkish text, based on the 1923 edition published by Orhaniye Press in Istanbul.[7] While most text was translated, Wilson retained key technical terms – such as *Muhabbet* (divine love, ethos, banquet, passion) – to maintain their original contextual meanings. His detailed footnotes and explanatory commentary provide valuable cultural and social framework for specialists and even readers unfamiliar with Ottoman-era concepts. Additionally, an extensive introduction situates the novel within its historical and cultural framework, drawing from Wilson's prior research[8] on the subject.

Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, *Nur Baba*'s author, was a pioneering Turkish novelist who experienced firsthand the transition from the late Ottoman Empire to the early Turkish Republic. His works often explore the contradictions of this period, making him a key figure in modern Turkish literature. In *Nur Baba*, he offers a fictionalized account of Sufism's decline, blending real-life elements with literary imagination. Although Karaosmanoğlu was himself a Bektashi, his portrayal of the order is highly critical. The novel describes their rituals and practices in detail, including *Nevruz*[9] celebrations. It suggests that the Bektashis had strayed from their spiritual origins, a critique that Karaosmanoğlu later acknowledged was partly inspired by his own disillusionment with the Bektashi path. This extract embodies Karaosmanoğlu's subtle critic:

> This Bektashi ablution is something completely unusual. Though the water makes less contact on the designated parts of the body than the ablutions taken five times a day, they believe that it lasts for the rest of your life. I don't know to what degree this is true, because our guide gave us this information in a half-joking, half-serious manner (p. 60).

The novel reflects prevailing public perceptions of Bektashiyya – and Sufism more broadly – at the time. The Bektashis were often viewed as ritually impure, apostates, or even atheists, with their esoteric rituals and cryptic symbolism adding to an air of mystery and suspicion. Historically, they maintained strong ties with the Ottoman state through their affiliation with the Janissary corps. However, following the corps'

5 Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri. 2009. *Ο τεκές του Νουρ Μπαμπά ή Κατήχηση στον έρωτα: μυθιστόρημα*. Edited and translated by Giorgos Salakidis. Thessalonikē: Stamoulēs Ant.

6 Karaosmanoğlu, Yakup Kadri. 1989. *Derviš a dáma*. Edited and translated by Xénie Celnarová. Bratislava: Tatran.

7 Karaosmanoğlu Yakup Kadri. 1928. *Nur Baba*. Istanbul: Orhaniye Matbaası.

8 Wilson, M. Brett. 2017. 'The Twilight of Ottoman Sufism: Antiquity, Immorality, and Nation in Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's Nur Baba'. *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49.2. 233–253; Wilson, M. Brett. 2024. 'Putting out the candle: Sufism and the orgy libel in late Ottoman and modern Turkey'. *Culture and Religion* 24.2. 135–155.

9 *Nevruz* is the Persian New Year festival, which is celebrated at the spring equinox, around the 21st of March. Bektashis believe that it also marks the birthday of Ali.

dissolution in 1826, the order was banned, further deepening public distrust. Although the Bektashis experienced a quite revival in the late 19th century – often operating under the guise of other Sufi orders, such as the Naqshbandiyya[10] – their secretive nature and association with past controversies only fueled suspicions about their moral and spiritual integrity.

Moreover, *Nur Baba* engaged with a broader transregional intellectual debate about Sufism's legacy in modern societies. Prominent Muslim reformists like Rashid Rida, Muhammad Abduh, and Musa Biyiyev viewed Sufism as an obstacle to Islamic modernization.[11] Meanwhile, the Wahhabi movement saw it as a corruption of true Islam.[12] Conversely, some intellectuals – such as Albanian writer Naim Frashëri[13] – believed that Bektashis could serve as a progressive force for national identity and modernization. These competing perspectives shaped Karaosmanoğlu's portrayal of the Bektashi order. Rather than rejecting Sufism entirely, the novelist critiques its contemporary manifestations, particularly the alleged moral corruption of certain lodges. The novel includes references to controversial practices like *Mum Söndürmek* (the 'Putting Out the Candle' ritual), rumored to involve orgiastic gatherings, which epitomize the moral decadence and licentiousness into which Sufis had fallen. At the same time, *Nur Baba* expresses a lingering admiration for Sufism, particularly in the poetic traditions of figures like Celaleddin Rumi[14]. Anyway, this admiration is largely unfulfilled, as the narrator, Macid, who initially seeks philosophical enlightenment in the Bektashi lodge, instead encounters superficiality, cynicism, and decadence.

> He (Nur Baba) appeared to give some importance to all these trifles, and I imagine that he was then striving to guide me via these lines and colors to the symbols and secrets of the Sufi path, which I would soon enter. This man was not nearly as mature and profound as he seemed at first. His words were quite simplistic and childish (p. 56).

In this way, *Nur Baba* encapsulates the prevailing intellectual discourse on Sufism's place in interwar Turkey, about its compatibility with modernity, and its role in state

10 Clayer, Nathalie. 2015. 'Sufi Printed Matter and Knowledge about the Bektashi Order in the Late Ottoman Period'. In Chih, Rachida, Mayeur-Jaouen, Catherine and Seesemann, Rüdiger (eds.). *Sufism, Literary Production, and Printing in the Nineteenth Century*. Würzburg: Ergon-Verlag. 351–367.

11 Sirriyeh, Elizabeth. 2014. *Sufis and anti-Sufis: The defence, rethinking and rejection of Sufism in the modern world*. London: Routledge.

12 Nahouza, Namira. 2018. *Wahhabism and the rise of the new Salafists: Theology, power and Sunni Islam*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

13 Naim Frashëri (m. 1900) was an Albanian poet and patriot, considered one of the most influential Albanian characters of the 19th century. He belonged to the Bektashiyya.

14 Celaleddin Rumi or Jalāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Rūmī (1207–1273) was a *ʿālim*, Sunni Muslim theologian, and Central Asian Persian mystical poet, known as one of the greatest authors of Persian mystical literature.

and nation-building.[15] This perspective fueled a revival of Sufi literary heritage, particularly figures like Yunus Emre[16] and Hacı Bektaş Veli,[17] who were reimagined as symbols of Turkey's authentic cultural identity – a process of 'Turkifying' Sufism. Alongside this cultural reclamation, Sufi practices and rituals certain Sufi practices and rituals have faced increasing criticism for being corrupted by Arab, Persian, and Greco-Roman influences, which were seen as causing the decline of the original Turkish-Ottoman heritage. Sufi poetry and music were reframed as enduring pillars of Turkish tradition, preserving the nation's cultural soul. Karaosmanoğlu's *Nur Baba* aligns with this effort to nationalize the past while condemning the perceived moral and ritual excesses of late Ottoman Sufi orders.

Ironically, as the novel was reaching its peak popularity, Sufism was celebrated as a cultural and symbolic heritage, while its living institutions – the orders – were abolished under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk in 1925. The novel reflects this paradox, advocating for a distinction between Sufism's historical legacy and its contemporary practices, which were deemed incompatible with the modern Republic's vision. This duality – honoring Sufism's past while suppressing its present – defined the Republican approach, transforming Sufism from a spiritual tradition into a carefully domesticated historical relic.

In *Nur Baba*, women serve both as active agents in the lodge's corruption and as symbols of societal decay. The central female character, Nigâr, embodies the shift from innocence to moral downfall. Initially depicted as an aristocratic woman bound by traditional values, her fascination with Nur Baba and the lodge leads her into a spiral of addiction, alcoholism, and infidelity. Her descent reflects the anxieties about women stepping beyond the emerging nuclear family structure of the late Ottoman Empire. The novel also critiques the influence of elite women in shaping the lodge's shameless. This dynamic mirrors broader societal anxieties about women's emancipation since the late Ottoman period. *Nur Baba* appears to critique the perceived superficiality of women's progress, suggesting that their newfound freedoms lead not to genuine empowerment but to moral and personal decay. Wealthy patrons like Nigâr and her aunt, Madame Ziba, are portrayed as key enablers of its moral decay. On the other side, while the *tekke* initially appears to promote gender inclusivity – where men and women worship together, and the shaykh's wife holds a significant role – this equality proves illusory. Ultimately, women remain subordinate to Nur Baba, whose manipulative power renders them powerless despite their apparent influence.

15 About this topic see Bein, Amit. 2020. *Ottoman ulema, Turkish Republic: Agents of change and guardians of tradition*. Stanford: Stanford University Press; Silverstein, Brian. 2011. *Islam and Modernity in Turkey*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

16 Yunus Emre (1238–1320) was a Turkish folk poet and Sufi who greatly influenced Turkish culture.

17 Hacı Bektaş Veli (1209–1271) was an Islamic scholar, mystic, saint, sayyid, and philosopher from Khorasan who lived and taught in Anatolia. Alevi and Bektashi Muslims believe the path of Bektaş is the path of Haqq-Muhammad-Ali since they were the source of Bektaşi teachings.

> She (Nigâr) was essentially a serious but weak-willed woman, whose life was as drowsy as the silence of a newborn baby in a bright white cradle. It took more for her to submerge herself in this swirling, murky entourage that burned, in her own words, like a thousand desires, a thousand types of candles. No, Nigâr was not felled on Nur Baba's intricately woven red carpet with the submissiveness of a pigeon with its wings clipped (p. 51).

Finally, Nur Baba's Bektashi *tekke* symbolically portrays a microcosm of late Ottoman society, bringing together individuals from diverse social backgrounds. The interactions between Istanbul's elite and lower-class sufis highlight the novel's exploration of class stratification and societal fragmentation. For the Ottoman elite, including Nigâr and her family, the lodge represents both an object of curiosity and a dangerous blurring of class boundaries. Nigâr's involvement is considered particularly scandalous from her cousin Macid, as it entails crossing a rigid social divide. While lower-class sufis are portrayed as coarse and unrefined, the elite disciples, particularly women, are depicted as pleasure-seeking and capricious, using the lodge as a space for indulgence rather than spiritual enlightenment.

> Wasn't it for this that she (Nigâr) left everything? Her husband and children? Where was her mother? How many days did she mourn when her mother died because of her? How many hours did she cry after her children went to live with her husband in order not to see her again? (p. 99).

This critique extends to other elite figures, such as Nasib Hanım, who uses the lodge for extramarital affairs, and Necati Bey, a government official whose escapism and indulgence in drinking mirror the broader decadence of the Ottoman ruling class. Despite its spiritual pretensions, the lodge ultimately mirrors the class hierarchies of the wider society. Wealthy patrons like Nigâr and Ziba receive preferential treatment, while lower-class disciples are relegated to servile roles.

In conclusion, Brett Wilson's translation of *Nur Baba* is an invaluable resource for understanding the transformation of Sufism from the late Ottoman Empire to the early Republican era. These changes are rooted in the Ottoman Empire's long process of internal restructuring (*Tanzimat*), shaped by its interactions with European modernity. The book also sheds light on the development of Islamic reformist and modernist movements, which profoundly influenced Sufism's ritual, cultural, and doctrinal landscape. More broadly, *Nur Baba* serves as a lens through which to examine late Ottoman/Turkish society's evolving attitudes toward gender, sexuality, and social stratification. By capturing the emotions and tensions of a society in transition, the novel offers a microhistorical perspective on the nationalization and modernization processes. It contributes to ongoing scholarly efforts to explore the transformation of Islamic tradition and late Ottoman/Turkish society in relation to Ottoman nationalism and secularism – not only in the context of the *Tanzimat* and Mustafa Kemal's reforms but in their wider cultural and social dimensions.