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RETRANSLATING 'KARA TOPRAK'

Ecofeminism revisited through a canonical folk song

Şebnem Susam-Saraeva

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH, SCOTLAND, UK

The Turkish folk¹ classic 'Kara Toprak' (Black/Dark Earth/Soil/Land) was composed by Aşık Veysel (1894–1973), *bağlama* virtuoso and prominent representative of the Anatolian *aşık* tradition.² The song offers a non-Western perspective on the gendering of nature and on the unity of God, nature and humans. In the Turkish context, it symbolizes human mortality and our dependence on and embeddedness in nature. While the lyrics (see Appendix) invite the listeners to rethink their relationship with the Earth and reconsider what they toil for in life, the song nevertheless perpetuates the belief that, being abundant and fecund, nature will forever provide for humans, provided it is respected and cared for. This belief in the boundless resources of nature, reinforced through the use of gendered metaphors for the Earth, led me to approach 'Kara Toprak' through the critical lens of ecofeminism, as both the belief in the fecundity of nature and the associated metaphors have been foci of ecofeminist debates.

Ecofeminism, an area of study encompassing different positions and theories on feminism and environmentalism, was formulated in the 1980s and gained prominence in the early 1990s (Gaard 1993; Plumwood 1993; Mies and Shiva 1993/2014). Its many strands focused on the interconnected relationships between the oppression and domination of women and the domination and exploitation of nature (Moore 2015:58; Kings 2017:70). Ecofeminist scholars have offered thought-provoking and thorough "analyses of the connections among racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, speciesism, and the environment" (Gaard 2011:27). However, within both feminist and environmentalist circles, ecofeminism has been declared dead, old-fashioned, an embarrassing chapter in the development of feminist thought on environmental and material issues.³ Its arguments were "rendered suspect by concerns that it presents women as being closer to nature than men are and especially by claims that link this to women's role as childbearers and childrearers, something that feminists have worked hard to undermine" (Moore 2015:6). By the end of the 1990s, ecofeminism was critiqued as essentialist and universalist, and consigned to oblivion. Scholars did continue to work on the intersection of feminism and environmentalism, but preferred to rename their approach in order to avoid any negative connotations arising from the label (Gaard 2011:26).⁴

Ecofeminism has been presented as a thing of the past, and folk songs have been discarded into oblivion in many parts of the world. Paradoxically, many environmentalists are turning to what they consider to be the wisdom of the indigenous, to the people assumed to have lived on/with the land harmoniously for millennia. This recourse to, and often the appropriation of, the knowledge of the indigenous is rooted in Western desires “to possess indigenous knowledges (as) held within a primitivist stereotype of the environmentally ‘valid’ and ‘useful’ indigene” (Jacobs 1994:90; see also McCredden 1997; Wilson 2005).⁵ Inevitably, scholars and activists who yearn for these knowledges can only try to understand indigenous unity with the land and all that lives on it through their own cracked lens of dichotomies such as nature/culture, human/nature, non-human/human, God/human, and male/female, based on the “traditional Western Cartesian conception of reality” (Kings 2017:75). Dualisms are often used for purposes of categorization and control, where a supposedly weaker party is placed under the domination of a stronger one, e.g. woman and nature vis-à-vis patriarchy (Swanson 2015:87). Even the Western ecofeminists’ revolt against patriarchal and capitalist systems is rooted in these very dichotomies. Rather unsurprisingly, certain critiques of ecofeminism identified it “as a Western phenomenon that could not easily be translated to, or imposed on, non-Western contexts” (Moore 2015:11). There are other conceptualizations of humans and the Earth that are not based on these dichotomies and they may open up new avenues of discussion. For ecofeminism to survive and still be useful, it would help to acknowledge “the relevance of other epistemologies” (Wilson 2005:350), especially those coming from lands not directly colonized by Western powers.

The argument put forward in this chapter reflects my belief that ecofeminism is still a useful and timely framework which can offer valuable insights. My goal here is to further develop some of the tenets of ecofeminism through the lens of translation by focusing on the ecological and spiritual views of a man from a peripheral language and culture – and within that culture from a rural background. In discussing some of the concepts articulated in the song and their possible translations into English, my objectives are to show how ecofeminist theories and ideas have informed my process of retranslating ‘Kara Toprak’, to address some of the criticisms directed at ecofeminism, and to contribute to the re-evolving ecofeminist debates by extending the applicability of this theoretical framework to other languages and cultures beyond the Anglophone ones.⁶ The retranslation I offer here does not aim to be a singable version of the song but treats the lyrics as a poem; and, it is of course only one among many possible interpretations.

My starting point in what follows is not a romanticization of the Anatolian mystic knowledge embedded in the song but debates on intersectionality, which has emerged as a key tool in many feminisms, including ecofeminism. Intersectionality helps illuminate the interconnectedness of various dimensions of identity, such as race, class, gender, dis/ability, sexuality, caste, religion, species, nationality, age and the effects which these can have on the discrimination against and oppression of the most vulnerable (Kings 2017:64, 71, 83). Ecofeminism’s ongoing revival/survival (Gaard 2011; Moore 2015; Swanson 2015; Kings 2017; Gough and Whitehouse 2020) entails listening to the voices of all the oppressed, with their various intersecting identities. To these I add here the voice of a male songwriter with a disability who lived and died in rural central Anatolia, albeit reinterpreted through the voice of a female British academic and translator originally from urban central Anatolia, both advocating for an ethics of caring for the Earth. Like Swanson (2015:95), I believe that “an ecofeminist ethic of care is inclusive” and that we have

to move past a divisive binary where the possibility of caring for this Earth is left up to, or best tended to, by women-as-leaders [...] No longer does *she* bear responsibility for fixing the Earth-damage of *him*. It becomes *our* responsibility; it is up to *us*; *we* all have to take responsibility from here on. [emphasis in original]

Aşık Veysel and ‘Kara Toprak’

Aşık Veysel Şatıroğlu was born to a farming family in 1894, in Sivrialan, Sivas, and died in the same village in 1973. He is highly regarded as a prominent poet of Turkish folk literature of the twentieth century. After going blind in childhood, first through smallpox, then an accident (Gümüş 2019:177), his father presented him with a *bağlama*, a traditional plucked string instrument. He learned folk poems and songs through his parents and the *aşıks* who visited his village (ibid.:177). His work, which came to symbolize the local and the Anatolian, gained recognition in Turkey within the context of the state- and nation-building efforts of the 1930s, contributing to cultural identity formation in the young Republic of Turkey (ibid.). His songs were canonized through state radio and TV broadcasts over the following decades, and from 1965 to his death he was allocated a monthly salary by the Grand National Assembly of Turkey in return for “his contribution to our native language and national solidarity”.⁷ His songs covered a range of themes, generally “based on morals, values, and constant questioning on issues such as love, care, beliefs, and how he saw the world as a blind man” (ibid.). Among more than 200 songs attributed to Aşık Veysel, ‘Kara Toprak’ and ‘Uzun İnce bir Yoldayım’ (I’m on a Long, Narrow Path) are the two best known, with the former arguably his most quoted (Parlak 2011:184).

Over the years, and especially since the start of the twenty-first century, ‘Kara Toprak’ generated several Turkish covers in a variety of genres, including contemporary folk with local and acoustic instruments, jazz, heavy metal, rock and rap, as well as classical guitar covers by Turkish and international musicians. Most notably, the renowned Turkish pianist and composer Fazıl Say based his acclaimed piece ‘Black Earth’ on Veysel’s ‘Kara Toprak’. Among the covers, that by a Turkish singer-songwriter of international fame, Tarkan, released as a single in 2013, remains the best known. Given the scope of this contribution, it is impossible to do justice to all these covers and to the multifaceted symbolism in ‘Kara Toprak’. In what follows, I focus on certain key concepts that feature in or inform the poem, how they may be translated into English, and how the discussion surrounding these concepts may feed into ecofeminist debates.

Is *Toprak* the Earth and *Kara* Black/Dark?

There are several existing translations of ‘Kara Toprak’ in English, mainly offered by Turkish fans on lyrics forums for the purpose of providing basic access to the content of the song.⁸ The only singable version, featuring the first, second and final stanzas, is by Tyson Nyofu, a US-based musician who has spent many years in Turkey.⁹ In these versions, the title is usually translated as ‘Black Earth’, and at least on two occasions as ‘Dark Earth’ (Nyofu’s singable version mentioned above, and Nazmi Ağıl’s version cited in Parlak 2011:184–185). ‘Black earth’ is a geological term, a direct translation of *chernozem* from soil science – literally black earth, from Russian *cherno* (black) and *zemla* (earth) – referring to a type of fertile black soil rich in humus. ‘Dark earth’, on the other hand, is an archaeological term.

It refers to a thick sediment which includes organic matter such as charcoal, indicating settlement over long periods of time; the term also evokes the rather unfortunate collocation 'dark continent' and its colonial and misogynistic overtones.¹⁰

The two words in the title are worth examining in some detail. *Toprak* in Turkish covers a range of concepts: soil, earth, land and ground – but without the dirt connotation of 'soil' in English. It is a tactile word, referring to something one can stoop down and pick up, something that crumbles in the hand and is good for growing things in. At the same time, it can signify land, especially one's homeland, mainly in the plural form (*topraklar*). 'Earth' in English, on the other hand, evokes first and foremost the planet we live on, the globe one cannot see in its entirety except from space; it is typically translated into Turkish as *dünya* (the world). The first part of the title, 'kara', has two meanings in Turkish: one, with its origins in the Arabic *qārra* (meaning continent), is land, the part of the Earth not covered by the oceans. The second meaning, with its origins in old Turkish, is 'black/dark', and is widely used in modern day Turkish alongside *siyah*, a word of Persian origin, which also signifies 'black'. At first glance, then, 'Kara Toprak' means humus soil, which is rich in dark, organic material made up of decaying plant and animal matter, and which is crucial for the health and fertility of the land. This perspective is in line with one of the poem's premises, viewing soil as a living being, a system – a premise held also by some Western agriculturalists since at least the start of the twentieth century (Harshberger 1911). Yet, as I explain below, there are other layers to the meaning of 'Kara Toprak', hence my decision to leave it untranslated in the version I offer here, in an attempt to direct attention to the diverse conceptualizations of soil/land/earth.¹¹

In her book on the changing nature of eco/feminism, Niamh Moore (2015) offers a genealogy of ecofeminist theories and activism to address the critiques of essentialism and universalism directed at ecofeminists in the 1990s. One strategy she uses is to focus on local, situated knowledges and the listing of activist hubs and networks, such as the Clayoquot Sound protests in Canada, the Chipko movement in India, and the Greenham Common Women's Peace Camp in the UK (Moore 2015:59). What these protests and movements had in common was the various ways in which debates on feminism and environmentalism intertwined in their coming into being. What makes each of them unique, on the other hand, is their focus on the here and now, the local and the tangible, as opposed to the abstract – the land as opposed to the Earth. They all emphasize "work which began not with abstracted notions of wilderness or rainforest, but with [e.g.] Clayoquot, with attention to the specificities of the politics of location and situated knowledges" (Moore 2015:23).

A similar concern with local and situated knowledges can be found in the life of Aşık Veysel, who reputedly established the first orchard in Sivrialan with the help of his siblings (Yılmaz 2019:3570). In a land known to be arid and barren, the family managed to grow a garden of apples and apricots, cherries and walnuts (*ibid.*). It is this intimate connection with the land he grew up on, and the knowledge of the soil he was working with, that is reflected in 'Kara Toprak', rather than a concern about the Earth in general. I would therefore argue that translating *toprak* in the title and the refrain with the more abstract 'Earth' would go counter to the emphasis on locality, on "the land that we live on" – as expressed by the First Nations people, such as Anishinabek in Canada and the US (cited in Wilson 2005:342–343).

In order to do justice to the conceptualization of the land and its specificity, any translation of this poem must take its historical and local context into consideration. 'Kara Toprak' is arguably *the* poem quoted in writings on the relationship between nature and the

Anatolians, as its multi-layered philosophical and mystic approach embodies their traditional conceptualization of nature (Yılmaz 2019:3566). This conceptualization is partially based on the fact that the people of Anatolia have depended on agriculture, therefore nature, for their survival for thousands of years (Parlak 2011:172). Parlak (ibid.:173) explains that before settling down in Anatolia, the Turks coming from Central Asia had

a nomadic life style. This meant more exposure to nature and natural forces, which were often unpredictable. Their efforts to understand nature and to attribute meaning to the forces that shaped it led them to develop systems of belief that placed these natural forces in the center of their lives. They believed that there was life in everything they could and could not perceive through their senses; therefore everything was sacred to a certain extent. Although their religious system was a blend of animism and shamanism, many Turkish groups had also been acquainted with Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, both of which placed utmost significance to man's [*sic*] harmonious existence with and within the natural environments.

This conceptualization, with its origins in Central Asia and later in Anatolia, is markedly different from the 'master model' (Plumwood 1993) that shaped Western culture's relationship with nature, which is based on taming, owning, extracting and exploiting – a process often facilitated through the employment of gendered metaphors.

Is *Toprak* the Mother?

The almost automatic translation of 'Kara Toprak' as 'Black Earth' that can be observed in the existing – non-professional – translations of the song is far from being literal or a translation error. Although Turkish has no grammatical gender, the personification of land/earth as an all-giving female is a trope shared in both the source and the target cultural contexts. While in English there is 'Mother Earth', in Turkish, there is *Toprak Ana* (literally Land/Earth Mother), a concept which goes back to ancient Turkic mythologies from Central Asia, as the complement to *Gök Ata* (literally Sky Father). Over the centuries the latter has fallen out of use, while the former is alive and well in common parlance.

What English speakers tend to visualize as Mother Earth is the globe and its biosphere personified as the giver and sustainer of life – an idealized image of a mother. For Turkish speakers, *Toprak Ana* is the ground beneath their feet, not only as the giver and sustainer of life, but also as the ultimate destination of a person's life. The standard idiom *toprağa vermek* (to give to the earth, i.e. to bury someone) is often worded as *toprak ananın koynuna koymak/virmek* (to place in/give to the embrace/bosom of Mother Earth) by grieving families and their circle of friends and relatives, in an attempt to offer some comfort in their sorrow. Other traditional idioms such as *topraktan gelir toprağa gideriz* (we come from soil/earth, we go back to soil/earth) are used as reminders of the transient nature of life, and the fact that our lives between birth and death are fully dependent on *toprak*.¹² According to Şenocak (2017:507), "*Toprak* is the mythological site of death, rebirth, striking roots, change and transformation, therefore an invitation to humans to face the realities they keep avoiding".¹³ *Toprak* is the ultimate recycler, transforming all life that unites with it, thus preparing "the basis for other living beings that will be created out of them" (ibid:515). The Turkish understanding of *Toprak Ana* thus reflects the Life/Death/Life cycle, unlike the English 'Mother

Earth', whose more problematic facets of death and transformation have been erased from collective consciousness over time.

The personification of *toprak* as a compassionate, protective and nurturing mother is extensively discussed in several articles that focus on the song (Şenocak 2017; Yılmaz 2019; Gümüş 2019). Şenocak, for instance, structures her article around five different facets of Mother Earth in Veysel's poem – a loyal lover and friend; the source of life, abundance and fertility; the healer; the origin of humankind and process of change and transformation; and the site of labouring and well-deserved income (2017:504–505). She then goes on to perpetuate the long-suffering, selfless, unappreciated, ever-forgiving and ever-patient image of the Turkish mother in her work, further anthropomorphizing *toprak* (ibid.:511). This interpretation is in line with the essentialism implied in the gendered Mother Earth metaphor (Gaard 2011:37), which has been intensely criticized by ecofeminists. As McCredden (1997:126) observes,

In a diverse range of patriarchal, as well as feminist, ecological and postcolonial discourses, the metaphor of mother earth has been invoked. It is used variously to emphasise fecundity, nurture, oneness and even bigness of creation, and – in the case of patriarchal and imperial discourses – plunderability.

Here I would argue that, notwithstanding the Turkic conceptualization of *Toprak Ana*, in this song *toprak* is not so much (or only) a mother, but a lover and a friend the poet keeps coming back to, sometimes as his equal, but often as an entity much greater than him (see also Yılmaz 2019:3570). It is not an infantilizing relationship where the supposedly female figure keeps on giving indefinitely, but a relationship of give and take, as I explain further in the final section of this chapter. Throughout my translation of the poem, I therefore avoided using any personal or possessive pronouns for *toprak*, in an attempt to reflect the neutrality and ambiguity in Turkish – as well as the language's ability to drop these pronouns when not needed – and to avoid conflation of the image of *toprak* with Mother Earth, as several of the existing translations have done. It is only in the final stanza ("One day, *toprak* will take Veysel to its bosom"), where the active voice was crucial to indicate agency, that I juxtaposed the neutral pronoun 'it' with 'bosom', usually associated with the feminine. In order to avoid over-gendering, I also opted for 'true' as the translation of *sadık* in the refrain ("My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*"), while existing translations often render it as 'faithful', a virtue historically associated with women.

Such metaphors depicting the Earth as a lover or friend are still suspect, of course, as they "imply a soft, kind, receptive, healing, warm and loving entity [which] is partial at best" and "utopian, romantic, and imaginary" at worst (Heather Eaton, cited in Moore 2015:208–209).¹⁴ Yet, reducing the imagery in 'Kara Toprak' to that of a generous and kind Mother Earth would not do justice to the poem's multi-layered philosophy, which is based on Sufism. Aşık Veysel comes from a long tradition of folk poets and Sufi mystics who lived in Anatolia, such as Rumi, Yunus Emre, Hacı Bektaş, Karacaoğlan and Pir Sultan Abdal; it is their teachings which helped him "express himself in the traditional aşık and dervish tradition" (Parlak 2011:183). In Veysel's poems and songs, as in those of his predecessors and masters, nature is regarded as God's great work and "love for the beloved, nature, and God is intermingled" (ibid.:183). Sufis tend to see the Creator in all the created, including the humans, and love all the created for the sake of the Creator. They

believe that “God is omnipresent and visible in everything one can perceive; hence there is oneness and unity in the universe” (ibid.:178). Furthermore, ‘Kara Toprak’ embodies the Sufi understanding that being united with the soil in death is returning to one’s original source (Yılmaz 2019:3569),¹⁵ that death is not the end but the ultimate union with the real lover (Gümüş 2019:183–184). Veysel’s, or his narrator’s, search for “the true beloved” – for truth – therefore ends in an understanding that he had “wandered in vain, toiled away for nothing” and in his realization and acceptance of his mortality (Gümüş 2019:182). *Toprak* thus emerges as the one true beloved, who not only provides for Veysel throughout his life, but is also the “vehicle or metaphor that will bring him to God” (ibid.:183–184). It is not only this implied unity between God, nature and humans, but also the references in the ninth stanza to the point, or dot, representing God’s creative processes in the Sufi tradition (ibid.:183), that rule out any facile translation of *toprak* as (Mother) Earth in English. Such a conceptualization also precludes regarding nature and all that is part of it as ‘the Other’ of the human, and consequently, challenges its exploitation or annihilation.

I would argue that such an outlook that breaks down the barriers between Earth, God and living beings, including humans, could contribute to addressing the critique of essentialism directed at ecofeminists. In tracing the changing nature of ecofeminism, Moore (2015:211) engages with this critique as follows:

Reading home or Mother Nature as metaphor relies on the separation of humans and nature, and on an implicit human exceptionalism. Making a critique of essentialism is actually an expression of an anthropocentric view of the world (cf. Gaard 2011), where humans are at the centre of things, which is where feminists who critique eco/feminism for essentialism demonstrate the limits of their theorizing. To read Mother Nature as metaphor relies on the assumption that something human (motherhood) is being applied to something non-human (nature). Yet if we refuse this distinction between human and non-human nature, such anthropocentric readings no longer make sense.

In ‘Kara Toprak’, the anthropocentrism implied in lines such as “Gave me sheep, gave me lamb, gave me milk” or “Brought my bloodline from Adam to this day” is somewhat mitigated by references to the ‘treasure’ and ‘generosity’ of God reflected on the Earth and its creatures, as well as the care and attention that should be directed to *toprak*. These treasures and generosity do not imply ‘natural resources’, as in the current Western understanding, but the process in which one’s own labour transforms into the Earth’s abundance.

Violence, labour and abundance – *Toprak* as an active agent

A major criticism of the conceptualization of Earth in gendered terms is based on the dichotomy of passive vs. active. The alleged passivity of the feminine and of the Earth, as well as other living beings, goes hand in hand with the violence directed at them (Gaard 2011:28):

The feminized status of women, animals, nature, and feminized others (children, people of color, farmers, slaves, as well as the body itself, emotions, and sexuality) have been conceived of as separate and inferior in order to legitimate their subordination under an elite and often violent and militarized male-dominant social order.

This social order is based on “imperialist and patriarchal mindsets which discursively constructed the land as feminine” (McCredden 1997:126), and therefore directly benefited from this construction in the form of large-scale land acquisition, land abuse, damming, mining and other forms of extraction of land-based resources. In the case of Aşık Veysel and ‘Kara Toprak’, violence is clearly implied in the lyrics, both in the form of overt references (e.g. ‘torture’, ‘belly pried open’, ‘face torn’)¹⁶ and covert ones such as animal husbandry. These references are particularly problematic to translate in the light of contemporary approaches to looking after the land and the creatures living on it, for example vis-à-vis animal rights and vegetarianism/veganism (Gaard 1993), permaculture, and no-dig horticulture. Yet, for Aşık Veysel who comes from a rural background in a fallen empire and then-developing country, this violence has less to do with colonialist or imperialist conceptualizations of the land as feminine, and more with the manual labour the land elicits from those who tend it.

In ‘Kara Toprak’, the land provides little “when not raked or dug”; it bestows its gifts only when sufficient care and attention are given. In exchange, *toprak* is the source of healing and health, awaits humans with open arms, and when it is time, takes them “to its bosom”. The understanding of Earth as “an active, reactive, and dynamic agent” (Wilson 2005:334) is certainly not limited to Anatolian mysticism. For instance, ecofeminist scholar Wilson has come across similar views about the Earth in her interviews with the Anishinabek, who regard “Mother Earth [a]s an active, living being that acts and reacts to human activities” (ibid.:347), rather than “a passive object, waiting to be acted upon” (ibid.:334). My translation adopts the active tense Veysel uses in relation to the Earth, and in a few instances I have further reinforced the active attribute of the Earth by shifting the actor to the front – e.g. “topraktan aldım” (I took from the land), translated as “the land delivered to me”, and “Hak’kın gizli hazinesi toprakta” (God’s hidden treasure is in the Earth), translated as “Earth keeps God’s hidden treasure”.

In her study of ‘Kara Toprak’, Şenocak (2017:510) contrasts earth and sky as follows: “With its down-to-earth and steady gaze, the land dissolves the world the air has effortlessly established up in the sky, as the land always leans on hard work and toil”. In this interpretation of the poem, any quick-fix formation of a world that does not involve labour is condemned. The shamanist belief that “The more you give to nature, the more nature gives back to you” is embedded in Aşık Veysel’s poetry and is further supported with Islamic beliefs (ibid.:512). For instance, in return for his labours, *toprak* gives the poet-narrator a rose, which is itself an important symbol in Islam, especially in the Sufi tradition (Gümüş 2019:183). The effort put into tending the land is linked to the secret of glimpsing eternity in this mortal world, and thus, leaving behind an immortal legacy (Mustafa Özçelik; cited in Gümüş 2019:183). Further associations of soil with humility, patience, trust, kindness, gratitude and compassion in the Sufi tradition tie in with the annihilation of the *nafs* (variously translated as ‘self’, ‘ego’ or ‘psyche’) and therefore, the eventual attainment of the ‘secret’ (Gümüş 2019:182; Şenocak 2017:510, 512). For the Sufis, argues Parlak (2011:181–182),

Self was part of nature, which was the great work of the Creator. Therefore studying the self meant studying nature, and respecting and protecting the created. ... The most valuable prayer ... was service to the created with the knowledge of oneness and unity of everything.

In environmental terms, and particularly from the perspective of ecofeminism, these debates relate to those on the more recent post-anthropocentric viewpoints, as well as the interconnectedness and co-existence of human communities with more-than-human worlds. In contemporary feminisms, the current emphasis understandably continues to be placed on strengthening the ‘self’ of the women after centuries of oppression, as well as challenging the current gendered workload distribution in public and private spheres. However, in their rejection of ecofeminism and its contributions, contemporary feminisms are risking becoming irrelevant in relation to the majority of issues facing humanity today. As Gaard (2011:32) argues,

Postmodern feminism focuses primarily on human categories, with little concern for the environment. It is this human-centered (anthropocentric) feminism that has come to dominate feminist thinking in the new millennium, effectively marginalizing feminism’s relevance. The global crises of climate justice, food security, energy justice, vanishing wildlife, maldevelopment, habitat loss, industrial animal food production, and more have simultaneously social and ecological dimensions that require both ecological and feminist analyses.

It is only through a more holistic understanding of the position of all humans – as well as non-humans – as intrinsic parts of an active and responsive Earth that contemporary feminisms can begin to address these urgent global issues.

Conclusion: Retranslating ‘Kara Toprak’ with and for ecofeminism

Its various trends aside, “the tenets of ecofeminism were always about care and caring, agency and action” (Gough and Whitehouse 2020:1427). I have argued that these tenets should be extended not only in terms of cultural and ethnic identities, but also in terms of gender. In the modern, Western worldview, as Kings (2017:77) puts it,

The divorce of mankind from the natural world (where women supposedly reside) allows for women to be perceived as being closer to nature, when in reality they are as much part of nature as the rest of humanity, whereas the achievement of manhood seems to be entirely dependent upon men distancing themselves from this fact.

Veysel’s work is a testimony to the fact that this is not the case all around the world or throughout history. As Wilson (2005:346) points out, “a distinct separation of men from nature does not necessarily exist within Anishinabek and some other indigenous cultures”, where different genders have rather different, but equally respected relationships with the land, and most importantly, none are “above nature”, but instead are in balance with it (ibid.:350). There are many conceptualizations of the relationships between the human and more-than-human world, and studying them can further strengthen ecofeminists’ arguments and observations. If ecofeminism is “a continually evolving academic/ activist tradition” (Kings 2017:82), it would benefit from acknowledging its roots in dualistic, Cartesian thinking and taking into consideration other conceptual frameworks. This re-evaluation can also address some of the critique directed at it, specifically charges of essentialism and universalism, and the value judgements that come with this critique.

Today, there is growing awareness of the fact that the Earth and its resources are indeed finite. Even the very word 'resource' is seen as problematic, as it implies that the Earth, its living and non-living treasures, are solely there to serve humans. An image of the Earth that keeps on providing infinite sustenance to people, as in Veysel's song, is surely a thing of the past. Yet, a multitude of projects around the world, including those on rewilding, regenerative agriculture and agroforestry, continue to demonstrate that the Earth rebounds when given the right care and attention – just as Veysel observes. It is my hope that contemporary readers of 'Kara Toprak' in its English translation, including ecofeminists, will be encouraged to learn more about such projects, and will work with what can be salvaged from the wisdom of diverse lands and cultures, and what still makes sense through the perspectives of our contemporary environmental, feminist and ecofeminist knowledge.

Notes

- 1 Folk music (*Türk halk müziği*) is an enduring tradition in Turkey, albeit shadowed by Turkish popular music, and by classical Turkish music (*Türk sanat müziği*), which continues the musical tradition of the Ottoman court. Folk songs are not necessarily all anonymous (though most are), and it is not uncommon to find folk songs attributed to the people who composed them.
- 2 *Aşık*s are singer-poets and bards who accompany their songs with long-necked lutes, primarily in Turkic cultures, as well as some non-Turkic cultures of the South Caucasus.
- 3 Moore, herself an ecofeminist, points to a temporal perspective underlying these critiques: "It ... appears that, not only is eco/feminism supposedly essentialist and universalist, but that it compounds its crimes, its lack of sophistication, its theoretical naïveté, through being essentialist and universalist *at the wrong time*. ... Though eco/feminism's emergence is traced to the 1970s and earlier, it is more commonly located in the 1980s and 1990s, thus exceeding the necessary temporal container of the 1970s for essentialism. Given this, eco/feminism can never even be a site of innocence, nostalgia, or loss. ... Eco/feminists' insistence on re-opening the supposedly closed questions of women and nature disrupts efforts to depict essentialism as safely confined to the past, and therefore eco/feminism challenges the progress narrative of feminism" (2015:220; emphasis in original). Moore argues that this challenge to the progress narrative ultimately undermines feminism's efforts to secure itself a place in the academy, and that this can only be mitigated by situating ecofeminism in the past or subjecting it to "a collective amnesia" (ibid.:221).
- 4 Gaard (2011) offers an excellent overview of the development of ecofeminism.
- 5 More often than not, this turning to – and the romanticization of – the past/indigenous knowledge is carried out with the best of intentions, as can be observed in the following quote: "Ecofeminism, a complementary philosophy to a caring ethic, can be understood as feminists' efforts to emphasize the interconnections between humanity, oppression, and ecological practices, and as a feminist practice that foregrounds a reconceptualization, arguably not new, of humanity's oneness with Earth. ... An ecofeminist ethic of caring re-attaches our collective consciousness to the timeless wisdom of indigenous and First Nations peoples, who knew themselves to be bound inextricably with Mother Earth" (Swanson 2015:100).
- 6 While this contribution may be seen as reflecting a growing interest in ecological issues in translation studies (e.g. Cronin 2017; Hu 2013), its understanding of the prefix 'eco' is somewhat different from the terms 'eco-translation' and 'eco-translatology' used in these works. The main thrust of this contribution is not, for instance, to elaborate on an ecology of poetry or song translation vis-à-vis the contextual, political or economic factors underlying any such translation or to see how the contemporary drive for ever larger scale translational work may have an impact on the environment. Rather, the contribution focuses on how an ecofeminist (re)interpretation of a poem may shape our understanding of our embeddedness in nature.
- 7 See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/%C3%82%C5%9F%C4%B1k_Veyysel.
- 8 See, for example, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/kara-toprak-black-soilearth.html>, <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/kara-toprak-mother-earth.html>, and <https://lyricstranslate.com/en/kara-toprak-black-earth.html-0>.
- 9 See www.nyofutysan.com/music.

- 10 The ‘dark continent’ was used to refer to Africa by the colonialists and to women’s sexual life by Sigmund Freud.
- 11 Needless to say, if this version were to circulate beyond this volume, the translation would have to be supported by a preface and/or endnotes explaining the reasons for the non-translation and elaborating on the various conceptual layers of *kara toprak*.
- 12 In recent years, a decidedly non-feminist take on *toprak* has also emerged in Turkey, reflected in phrases such as *ya benimsin ya toprağın* (you either belong to me or the earth) – a phrase uttered by jealous male partners who (threaten to) kill their lovers/ex-spouses for allegedly being unfaithful.
- 13 All translations from Turkish are mine unless otherwise stated.
- 14 Alternative views of nature can be glimpsed in the work of other ecofeminists such as Linda Vance (cited in Moore 2015:209): “After all, anyone who spends much time in the natural world knows full well that nature is not June Cleaver. I wrote the first version of this chapter while hiking in the forests and mountains of Vermont, where – in June – hail, thunder, rain, and lightning assailed me; where I slipped and slid over moss-covered boulders and slime-covered roots; where I toppled into a crevasse on a mountainside when loose gravel gave away under my boot; and where, at last, I was driven from a rocky summit by seventy-miles-per-hour winds, sleet and snow, and cloud too thick to see through. This nature – my nature – was a wild and rowdy woman, a bad and unruly broad with no concern for her children, and no use to anyone but herself. This is the nature you will rarely hear men celebrate as female; it represents, after all, an unsuitable role for a woman.”
- 15 This is in reference to the creation of humans from dried, black mud in Surat Al-Hijr, verse 26 of the Qur’an (Gümüş 2019:182).
- 16 The relevant lines in Turkish are in the active, not passive voice (e.g. ‘I pried open its/her belly’). The poet/narrator is directly implicated in the torture of the Earth, which only bestows abundance in return. Opting for this translation, however, would require a choice between gendered and non-gendered possessive pronouns (its/her), and was therefore avoided in the version offered here. The direct involvement of the poet/narrator in this process is instead implied through the use of ‘my pick and spade’ and ‘my hands and nails’.

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Appendix

Kara Toprak

Dost dost diye nicesine sarıldım
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır
Beyhude dolandım boşa yorulduğum
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Nice güzellere bağlandım kaldım
Ne bir vefa gördüm ne faydalandım
Her türlü isteğim topraktan aldım
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Koyun verdi kuzu verdi süt verdi
Yemek verdi ekmek verdi et verdi
Kazma ile dövmeyince kıt verdi
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Âdem'den bu deme neslim getirdi
Bana türlü türlü meyva yetirdi
Her gün beni tepesinde götürdü
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Karnın yardım kazmayınan belinen
Yüzün yırttım tırnağınan elinen
Yine beni karşıladı gülünen
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

İşkence yaptıkça bana gülerdi
Bunda yalan yoktur herkes de gördü
Bir çekirdek verdim dört bostan verdi
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Havaya bakarsam hava alırım
Toprağa bakarsam dua alırım
Topraktan ayrılısam nerde kalırım
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Dileğin varsa iste Allah'tan
Almak için uzak gitme topraktan
Cömertlik toprağa verilmiş Hak'tan
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Hakikat ararsan açık bir nokta
Allah kula yakın kul da Allah'a
Hak'kın gizli hazinesi toprakta
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Bütün kusurlarımı toprak gizliyor
Merhem çalıp yaralarımı tuzluyor
Kolun açmış yollarımı gözlüyor
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

Her kim ki olursa bu sırra mazhar
Dünyaya bırakır ölmez bir eser
Gün gelir Veysel'i bağrına basar
Benim sâdık yârim kara topraktır

(Aşık Veysel)

Kara Toprak

So many I've held close, thinking they're true friends
My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*
I wandered in vain, toiled away for nothing
My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

I've got attached to many a beauty
Got no loyalty back, nor did I benefit
Whatever I desired, the land delivered to me
My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

Gave me sheep, gave me lamb, gave me milk
Gave me food, bread and meat
Gave little, when not raked or dug
My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

Brought my bloodline from Adam to this day
Grew me many a fruit

Carried me on top every day
 My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

Belly pried open with my pick and spade
 Face torn with my hands and nails
 Still welcomed me with roses
 My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

Smiled at me while tortured
 There's no lie in this, everyone's a witness
 I put in one pip, gave me back four orchards
 My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

If I look up at the sky, I get nothing but air
 If I look after the earth, I receive blessings
 If separated from the earth, what would become of me
 My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

If you have a wish, ask God, but
 Don't stray far from the soil for it to be fulfilled
 Generosity was bestowed by God upon the earth
 My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

If you are looking for truth, it is a clear point
 God is close to human and human to God
 Earth keeps God's hidden treasure
 My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

Earth covers all my flaws
 Puts salt on my wounds, salves my cuts
 Waits for me with open arms
 My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

Whoever is honoured with this secret
 Leaves to this world an immortal legacy
 One day, *toprak* will take Veysel to its bosom
 My true beloved has always been *kara toprak*

(Translation by Şebnem Susam-Saraeva)