

Sabahattin Ali

Madonna  
in a  
Fur Coat

Translated by  
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qanun nəşriyyatı



Madonna in a Fur Coat is a haunting and emotionally resonant novel that explores the quiet depths of loneliness, the transformative power of love, and the tragedy of missed opportunities. Written by Turkish author Sabahattin Ali, the book tells the story of Raif Efendi, a gentle, misunderstood man whose life appears unremarkable from the outside. Yet beneath his silence lies a profound and heartbreaking past.

The narrative unfolds through Raif's secret diary, in which he recounts his youthful years spent in Berlin and his intense, life-altering relationship with Maria Puder – the enigmatic woman behind a striking self-portrait known as “Madonna in a Fur Coat”. Their bond, built on vulnerability, mutual understanding and emotional honesty, becomes a rare refuge in an otherwise indifferent world.

Celebrated for its elegant prose, psychological depth and timeless exploration of human connection S.Ali's novel is a modern classic of Turkish literature and continues to captivate international readers with its quiet beauty and its piercing portrayal of love, loss and the delicate fragility of the human heart.

Of all the people I have chanced upon in life, there is no one who has left a greater impression. Months have passed but still Raif Efendi haunts my thoughts. As I sit here alone, I can see his honest face, gazing off into the distance, but ready, nonetheless, to greet all who cross his path with a smile. Yet he was hardly an extraordinary man. Indeed, he was rather ordinary, with no distinguishing features – no different from the hundreds of others we meet and fail to notice in the course of a normal day. Indeed, there was no part of his life – public or private – that might give rise to curiosity. He was, in the end, the sort of man who causes us to ask ourselves: ‘What do they live for? What do they find in life? What logic compels them to keep breathing? What philosophy drives them, as they wander the earth?’ But we ask in vain, if we fail to look beyond the surface – if we forget that beneath each surface lurks another realm, in which a caged mind whirls alone. It is, perhaps, easier to dismiss a man whose face gives no indication of an inner life. And what a pity that is: a dash of curiosity is all it takes to stumble upon treasures we never expected. That said, we rarely seek that which we do not expect to find. Send a hero into a dragon’s den, and his task is

clear. It is a hero of another order who can summon up the courage to lower himself into a well of which we have no knowledge. Certainly this was not the case for me; if I came to know Raif Efendi, it was happenstance, pure and simple.

After losing my modest post in a bank – I am still not sure why, they said it was to reduce costs, but within the week they had hired someone else – I spent a long time seeking work in Ankara. My meagre savings kept me going through the summer, but as winter approached, I knew that my days of sleeping on friends' sofas would soon come to an end. My restaurant ration card was to expire within the week, and even this I could not afford to renew. Every failed job application drained me of all hope, even when I knew from the outset that my chances were nil; cut off from my friends, I would go from shop to shop seeking work as a salesman; rejected by them all, I would wander the streets in despair for half the night. From time to time, my friends would invite me over for supper, but even as I sat there, enjoying their food and drink, the fog refused to lift. And here was the strangest thing: the more my situation worsened, the less I could be sure of surviving from one day to the next, the greater my shame and my reluctance to ask for help. I would see a friend in the street – a friend who in the past had been more than willing to suggest where else I might look for work – and I would rush past him, head bowed. I was even different with friends whom I had openly asked for food, or happily borrowed money from. When they

asked me how I was doing, I would flash an awkward smile and say, 'Not bad ... I keep finding bits of work to do, here and there.' With that, I'd take my leave. The more I needed my friends, the more I longed to run away.

One evening, I was ambling along the quiet road between the station and the Exhibition Hall, breathing in the beauties of an Ankara autumn, in the hope that they might lift my heart. The sun reflected in the windows of the People's House had punctured this white marble building with holes the colour of blood; hovering over the pine saplings and the acacia trees was a cloud of smoke that might also have been steam or dust, while a group of bedraggled workers returning from some construction site or another moved in hunchbacked silence over the skid-marked tarmac ... And everything in this scene seemed content to be where it was. All was well with the world. All was in its proper place. There was, I thought, nothing more I could do. Just then a car sped past me. Glancing at the driver, I thought I recognized him. The car came to a halt a few paces ahead, and the door flew open. Leaning out of the window was my old classmate Hamdi, calling out my name.

I went over to him.

'Where are you off to?' he asked.

'Nowhere. I'm just out for a stroll.'

'Get in, then. Let's go to my house!'

Without waiting for an answer, he ushered me into the seat next to him. Along the way he told me he was on his way home from a tour of a number of factories

owned by the firm he now worked for: 'I sent a telegram back to the house to let them know when to expect me. So they'll have the place ready for me. Otherwise I'd never have dared to invite you over!'

I laughed.

Time was when Hamdi and I had seen a great deal of each other, but since losing my job I'd not seen him at all. I knew him to be making a good living as an assistant director of a firm that traded in machinery but also involved itself in forestry and timber. And that was precisely why I had not sought him out after losing my job: I feared that he might think I'd come asking for a loan, not a job.

'Are you still at that bank?' he asked.

'No,' I said, 'I left.'

He looked surprised.

'So where are you working now?'

Half-heartedly, I said, 'I'm unemployed!'

He turned to look me over, taking note of the condition of my clothes, and then, as if to let me know he did not regret inviting me back to his house, he smiled and gave me a friendly pat on the back. 'Don't worry, we'll talk it over tonight and figure something out!'

He seemed so confident, so pleased with himself. He could now, after all, enjoy the luxury of helping his friends. How I envied him!

His house was small but charming; his wife homely but amiable. Without embarrassment, they kissed each other. Then Hamdi left me to go and wash.

He had not introduced me formally to his wife, so I just stood there in the sitting room, uncertain what to do. Meanwhile, his wife lingered in the doorway, furtively watching me. She seemed to be considering something. Most probably, she was wondering if she should invite me to sit down. Changing her mind, she sidled away.

While I asked myself why it was that Hamdi had left me hanging like this, for I had always known him to be fastidious about such things – if anything, too fastidious – believing, as he did, that attentiveness was a necessary ingredient of success. It was, perhaps, a quirk accorded to those who had risen to positions of importance – to be deliberately inattentive in the presence of old (and less successful) friends. To take on a humble, fatherly tone with friends you have always addressed with some formality, to feel entitled to interrupt them mid-flow with some meaningless question, most often with a soft and compassionate smile ... I'd had so much of this in recent days that it did not even occur to me to be angry with Hamdi. All I wanted was to put this irksome situation behind me. But at just this moment an old village woman padded in, wearing a headscarf, a white apron and much-darned black socks, and bearing coffee. So I sat down on one of the armchairs – midnight blue, embroidered in silver – and looked around. On the wall were photographs of relatives and film stars; on the bookshelf that clearly belonged to the wife, there sat a number of cheap novels and fashion magazines. Stacked beneath a side table were a few albums that looked to

have been well leafed through by visitors. Not knowing what else to do, I picked up one of them, but before I could open it, Hamdi appeared at the door. He was combing his wet hair with one hand while buttoning up his shirt with the other.

‘So, now,’ he said. ‘Bring me up to date.’

‘There’s nothing to say, really, beyond what I’ve already told you.’

He seemed pleased to have run into me. Perhaps because it gave him a chance to show me how well he’d done, or because, when he looked at me, he was so glad he wasn’t like me. When misfortune visits those who once walked alongside us, we do tend to feel relief, almost as if we believe we have ourselves been spared, and as we come to convince ourselves that they are suffering in our stead, we feel for these wretched creatures. We feel merciful. This was more or less the tone Hamdi took when he asked, ‘Are you still writing?’

‘Now and again ... Some poetry, some stories ...’

‘But tell me, is there ever any profit in such things?’

Again, I laughed. Whereupon he said, ‘You really have to stop, my friend!’ and went on to lecture me about how, if I wanted to be successful, I had to start being practical, and how empty pursuits like literature could do nothing but harm once your schooldays were behind you. He spoke to me as if I were a child, never considering that I might have something to say, indeed to argue, in response, and he did not shy away from making it clear that it was success that had given him his courage.