

Received: 27 May 2025 Accepted: 15 July 2025

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33182/bc.v15i4.2932>

About Dry Grasses and Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Rhetoric

Argun Abrek Canbolat¹

Abstract

In this study, I analyse Nuri Bilge Ceylan's About Dry Grasses through the lens of contemporary global and local politics. After briefly summarizing the plot, I explore the themes of illiberalism and anti-intellectualism. These issues are examined in relation to anti-individualism, human nature, tribalism, anti-universalism, anti-secularism, moral values, family, rituals, media, and post-truth communication. Once these concepts are clearly established, I move on to a discussion within the context of Turkey, arguing that the Turkish case offers multiple perspectives on these two themes. It can be seen that when examined within the framework of these notions and topics, Turkey's current political and social situation is very close to illiberalism. Finally, I draw connections to About Dry Grasses, suggesting that Nuri Bilge Ceylan, whether intentionally or unintentionally, employs a rhetorical framework in which illiberalism and anti-intellectualism play a significant role.

Keywords: Nuri Bilge Ceylan, About Dry Grasses, illiberalism, anti-intellectualism, rhetoric

Introduction

In this work, I analyse and interpret Nuri Bilge Ceylan's film *About Dry Grasses* (2023) in the light of Turkey's sui-generis illiberal politics. I believe that Ceylan's latest film contains elements of, or rather paves the way for, a highly supported and contemporary politics of illiberalism and anti-intellectualism in Turkey. As often suggested by right wing discourse, Turkish intellectuals are said to be disconnected from Turkish people's values. I believe that *About Dry Grasses* (hereafter *ADG*) supports an outlook that is consistent with that discourse and interprets Turkish intellectuals as immoral, inconsistent, and shallow. This is apparent from the way the narrative unfolds in *ADG*. Rather interestingly, when you analyse Ceylan's cinema from this latest perspective and look back at certain films, one can speculate that this approach has been built over a number of years.

In the second section of this work, I briefly summarize the main plot and events, and talk about the characters. In the third section, I will take a quick look at the notions of illiberalism and anti-intellectualism. In the fourth section, I deal with the Turkish case concerning these notions. And in the fifth section I interpret *ADG* and some other Nuri Bilge Ceylan films in terms of these notions.

¹ Assistant Professor at Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University / Department of Philosophy / Turkey. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-4068-7690



A Summary of the Plot

Ceylan’s cinema can be regarded as not based on the main plot but, as an example of slow cinema,² on the characters and their deep and realistic structure. However, almost no cinematic narrative can be understood without the plot. In this section, I briefly mention the narrative framework of the film and its characters, highlighting the issues I consider most important.

In ADG, we witness a story that takes place in a distant mountain village in Eastern Anatolia. The film was actually shot mainly in Karayazı District in Erzurum Province in a village called İncesu. The main characters are all primary school teachers. The film starts with a scene in which teachers and pupils return to school after the summer holiday. A critical event occurs when the art teacher, Samet (Deniz Celiloğlu), gives a present to one of his students, Sevim (Ece Bağcı). During a routine search, this present and a letter are found by a conservative teacher, Kevser (Nalan Kuruçim), in Sevim’s school bag. The letter is, as we understand, a love letter written to Samet. After the search, Samet gets hold of the letter and Sevim asks him to give it back but he lies and says he has destroyed it. Around the same time, Kevser talks with the female students and tells them to be cautious when they are with male teachers. After a little while, the principal asks two teachers, Samet and his housemate Kenan (Musab Ekici), to come and testify in a possible harassment case involving Sevim.

The other, parallel story concerns Samet, Kenan, and Nuray (Merve Dizdar³). Mutual friends set up a blind date between Nuray and Samet, yet Samet seems uninterested in the meeting. Later, Kenan is added to the picture, and it seems that Kenan and Nuray have something between them. However, when Kenan becomes interested in a possible relationship, Samet moves in and tries to complicate things. Samet and Nuray have sex and the tension between the friends grows.

In these stories, the characters I would like to focus on are Samet, Kenan, Nuray, and partially Kevser, although she appears very briefly. Throughout the film, we see suggestions of paedophilia involving both Samet and Kenan. Samet is interested in Sevim, a minor, and Kenan is said to pinch the cheeks of the girls from time to time. These suggestions are one of the critical points in the film which can be regarded as being used rhetorically against intellectualism, among others. Before delving into such rhetoric, I will stress certain essential points regarding illiberalism and anti-intellectualism, which will help us decipher the rhetoric.

Illiberalism and Anti-intellectualism

In this part, I will mainly discuss illiberalism and anti-intellectualism. These issues are ultimately related to our current discussion since I suggest that some of Ceylan’s works can be interpreted as anti-intellectualist and illiberalist.

Illiberalism, according to the dictionary definition, “...is generally seen as a backlash against modern liberal and progressive ideas and ideologies...” (Merriam Webster Dictionary, 2024). It is, however, at first glance, easy to conclude that liberal political thought evolved to merge with capital economy, leading mostly to less equality in terms of opportunity and well-being. Yet, illiberal thought and illiberal politics, being able to ideally support almost any kind of

² See: Tiago De Luca, Nuno Barradas Jorge George (eds.), (2016). *Slow Cinema*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.

³ Merve Dizdar, for her role Nuray, won the best actress award in Cannes in 2023.



conservatism, are not a direct opposite to modern liberal economy. It is mainly opposing the historical roots of liberalism, which should have supported freedom in general.⁴

Illiberalism can be considered, as I see, in two dimensions: (i) As a negative ideology opposing liberal *ideals*, and (ii) as a right-wing supportive ideology. Its negative point, although apparent, consists of various elements and it is context dependent. Therefore, firstly, I will briefly examine its general aspects considering (i) and (ii); then I will analyse the Turkish context.

Illiberalism, as a negative ideology, appears to consist of many elements some of which are more essential than others. Stephen Holmes (2022: 21) characterizes illiberalism through anti-individualism, the social nature of human beings, tribal loyalty, anti-universalism, and anti-secularism. As far as anti-individualism is concerned, defenders of illiberal thought suggest that liberal thought and liberal ideals give importance to the self and not to society. This is, they say, something that makes us less human as well as unhappy. Simpson (2015: 25-45.), who formulates illiberalism in his book *Political Illiberalism: A Defence of Freedom*⁵, tries to centralize his thought using Aristotle as the foundation. *The argument from authority mistake* aside, this thought is useless since Aristotle would not have meant socially conservative groups while thinking of “humans as social animals” in *De Anima* (2007). Moreover, liberalism, although going multiple ways empowering global capital forces, in its very core does support individual freedom *within* society. The illiberalist agenda, if there is one, would more consistently promote religious social groups such as church and conservative groups (as we can observe from both illiberal politics worldwide and certain pro-illiberalist writers). The social groups which promote freedom of the individual within society would not be seen as legitimate due to their focus on individualism. As such, given the social nature of people, the anti-individualist views that illiberals have are at least not consistent. What is more, some such social groups can be tribal groups and tribalism is in its very core an anti-modern phenomenon, although it exists in humans’ very nature (Holmes, 2022: 3,4.). This partly refers to the nature/nurture dilemma which is, as can be seen easily, deeply rooted. However, it can be argued that no value is acceptable in the modern world on the grounds that it is more compatible with human nature. We know that humans are capable of many bad actions, some of which are compatible with human nature; yet we do not legitimize these actions on humanistic grounds. Tribal tendencies, as well, can be seen in underdeveloped and developing countries, and less in developed ones. Although in itself it is no harmful collective, when conflicts of interest arise between tribes (and this is more than natural, it is inevitable) the harmful nature of tribal tendencies shows itself.⁶

Another point worth raising, following Holmes, is that of anti-universalism. Certain anti-globalist ideals such as pluralism can be thought of as progressive and cultivating, yet the illiberal movement takes its roots from this conservatism, and it seems that almost no universalist view exists in it. Thinking of the universal declaration of human rights, for instance, and such humanistic movements and activist approaches such as green politics against global warming, queer rights activism, and women’s rights activism, not a penny would be given to them by the illiberal movement. Its protagonists claim to be on the side of humans, but it is evident that as no conservative movement can be, the illiberal movement itself cannot

⁴ See Simpson, P. L. P., 2015.

⁵ Which is quite ironic.

⁶ See Holmes, 2022, for more.

be on their side either. Simpson (2015: 70-85) suggests that since illiberalism denotes no government bigger than federative mini-states, state-held general politics will no longer exist and people can live however they wish to. This is partly misleading. It is easily recognizable that illiberal governments worldwide are not in the form of federal states. That is to say, federal minimal governments can be illiberal but a strong mechanism above all seems to be needed in practically illiberal states such as in Russia, Turkey, Trump’s USA, and many Middle Eastern states.⁷

Besides Holmes identification, on which I commented above, I wish to add a few more points concerning illiberal thought, mainly following the Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism (2022), namely, moral value defending, family, rituals and their value, common people’s ideas as a practical value creator mechanism, media control, and post-truth communication. Illiberal movements, as represented by Simpson, appear to defend so-called moral values. Stressing the degeneration of humanity, human progress, for illiberalists, seems to be a value-destructive process. As such, modern values can be thought of as degenerative, and this inevitably leads to right wing conservatism, which globally cannot be interpreted as defending modern values. Therefore, the value defending of illiberal movements is based upon values of the distant past, such as the importance of family. This rhetoric, based itself upon family, is dominant in almost all conservative thought.⁸ Naturally conserving the family for decades, conservative right wing thought manipulates and sanctifies this so-called value and determines its constituents. For instance, almost all conservative governments around the globe assert that queer rights are a threat to family values. In defence of that outdated view, they state that the future of the human species is in danger. “Reproduction of humans” in this age, may be one of the least important problems, I believe. Furthermore, no queer rights are endangering such reproduction.⁹

Another point that illiberals emphasize is the importance of rituals in human life. They assert that a chaotic and liberal lifestyle is inhumane. By rituals, many conservative illiberals are referring to religious rituals. It might be true that such rituals are good for some people’s psychology, although humans have the right to be unhealthy. What is more, in some communities nonparticipants in religious rituals can easily be marginalized and this may lead to neighbourhood pressure. Underrepresented groups and minorities in particular suffer considerably from such practices.

Related to these issues is the manipulation of the general public. Zoran Oklopčič, (2022: 218) takes this issue one step further and illustrates the point rather illuminatingly. He says:

What makes these purposes and outcomes illiberal is not as self-evident as it may seem. The illiberalism that unites them is not a doctrine, theory, creed, or ideology. Instead, the illiberalism in question is best seen as a set of perceptions, inclinations, and dispositions, which are attributed to specific protagonists of populist nationalism (Blokker 2005), authoritarian populism (Halmai 2019), or autocratic legalism (Scheppelle 2018). Though we might imagine those populists, nationalists, legalists, and authoritarians as we *think* they imagine themselves (i.e. as the avengers of the

⁷ See more in Beerbohm, 2017.

⁸ See Pappin, 2022, for more.

⁹ Among many others, see for instance: BBC News, 2017, 2023; KaosGL, 2016; Euronews, 2023.



downtrodden masses, champions of the common people, or as the loudspeakers of voiceless communities) it is not clear whether those who follow them think the same, or – as a more general matter – that there are good enough reasons to consider them all as the protagonists of some unspecified illiberalism.

That is to say, illiberalism as a doctrine cannot be a consistent one. It is just a set, and this set includes some inclinations, persons, incoherent ideas, and so on. One element of this set is evidently authoritarianism. What accompanies authoritarianism is media control and post-truth communication, since authoritarian governments wish to authorize, shape, and control the masses. Opposition media outlets must be stopped or at least regulated. Moreover, propaganda must be spread through partisan media. That is how people are made to believe what the government wants them to believe.¹⁰ Some of the above discussion mentions that corresponding illiberalism seems to be rooted in anti-intellectualism as well. People under illiberal rule and who support it regard intellectual thoughts as useless and unpractical. Under such rules, intellectual production is nothing more than an intellectual game if it exists. It is not for the good of the people of the land under the rule. It is a waste of time. It is also so disconnected from the people that it cannot grasp the social facts truly. Those who grasp the facts are those who experience them. Therefore, intellectuals are unnecessary or even persona non-grata (Gençoğlu, 2023: 2099). They are not needed. They are not wanted.

Eigenberger and Sealander (2001) proposed that anti-intellectualism is an attitudinal construct consisting of a general negative attitude toward intellectual activity and those who engage in intellectual activity (Laverghetta, et.al., 2007: 1050).

Anti-intellectualism, as Daniel Rigney (1991: 435) puts it, is divided into three kinds: (i) religious anti-rationalism, (ii) populist anti-elitism, and (iii) unreflective instrumentalism. The first is apparent both in post-truth propaganda and actions and in discourses to undermine rational, positivist, and scientific thought. As well as anchoring the propaganda on religious grounds to gain an unbreachable defence, these kinds of anti-rationalistic movements may *interpret* the related religion however they want to. This happens mostly via state organisms and controlled media. The second is rooted in what I discussed above; namely, the speculative view that intellectuals are not members of the general public and do not understand them. They live in their own reality, and this does not reflect people's experience. That is why whatever they say and do is either irrelevant or related to some kind of treason. The third aspect is the uselessness of the intellectual agenda. Thoughts, philosophy, and deeply rooted discussions are of no good to common people, so they are useless.

In the following part of the paper, I would like to emphasize illiberalism and anti-intellectualism in the Turkish case in its sui-generis structure *briefly* so as to tie it in with Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *ADG* and some of his other films.

Illiberalism and Anti-intellectualism in Turkey

This topic, in itself, could be part of a bigger project and there are many things to touch upon. I will, therefore, try to summarize the issue taking few examples and events as guiding points.

¹⁰ See Culloty & Suiter, 2022, for more.

I will go on with my discussion with the points I discussed above, giving them numbers to tie them in later to Nuri Bilge Ceylan’s main rhetoric.

Taking anti-individualism as the starting point, it is clear that the Justice and Development Party, JDP, (“Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi” in Turkish) regime in Turkey classically depends on opposition to individualistic politics as can be seen from their apparent attacks on freedom of speech. Many journalists, politicians, and academics are deemed guilty because of their opposing views.¹¹ However, if one thinks that the JDP (which has been in power for more than twenty years) has been defending collective gatherings and thoughts rather than individualistic approaches one would be mistaken. Permission is denied for almost all protest meetings and no unpermitted meeting is ignored by the police. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has also even said that “we have banned the thing called a strike.” (Diken, 2018). It seems that the only social gatherings allowed by the state are religious ones and those closely aligned with the right-wing religious attitude of the JDP. Therefore, the JDP’s anti-individualism is directed towards the liberty of certain individuals and their collective actions.

The JDP’s certain conservative discourses and actions can be linked to their rhetoric on the nature of humans. They base some of their opposition view to LGBTQI+ communities firstly through the post-truth argument that they are not natural. The family rhetoric is also apparent there. JDP policy makers and *thus* their supporters continuously declare that queer rights movements harm the family institution deeply as well as the so-called moral values of the people. Furthermore, these kinds of movements are said to have originated from foreign powers, who want to depopulate Turkey. (Birgün, 2020). This focus on families and family ties also legitimizes the tribal view that has ever been present in Turkish territory. Loving your family and clan most necessarily leads to allying to some others (religious, racial, or national) or making enemy clans, which is all to the good of any populist and polarizing regime.

The anti-universalist view is defended in the current political agenda under the slogan “yerli ve milli”, meaning “domestic and national”. To merge with or to attain universal values is now a dream for the visionary people of the Turkish Republic. Any universalist view is seen as a ploy of foreign forces. Ideologically closing¹² on itself and creating echo chambers as big as the country itself, the hegemony tries to control everything. It is even within the power of the hegemonic regime that the İstanbul Agreement can be withdrawn from in a day by misleadingly proposing that local laws cover everything in the Agreement.¹³

Media control and post-truth communication are other two leading notions that any hegemonic government in the last century has focused on. In Turkey, almost all the TV media terrestrially broadcasting and almost all the printed media are either in the hands of government-supporting big holdings or groups or directly or indirectly linked to the government either by law¹⁴ or by the capital in use of some government officials. In this way, the news is tightly controlled and there is almost no problem in terms of prohibiting the news that can or will be used against the government.¹⁵ Some may think that in the age of social

¹¹ See. Human Rights Watch website for more.

¹² See, Gezgin, 2019.

¹³ See, İletişim Başkanlığı, 2021.

¹⁴ Such as TRT channels.

¹⁵ See RTÜK, 2022, for more information.



media this is not important. However, it certainly is, for two reasons. One is that Turkish people still use TV as a media source greatly (RTÜK, 2018) and the second is that social media is also controlled both by using bans and by some recent legislation (Engelliweb, 2023).

Anti-secularism and anti-intellectualism go hand in hand in today's Turkey since it is clear that it is almost impossible for one to be an intellectual without being secular. Many government officials, as well as supportive media figures, openly defend anti-secularism and support what can be called an Ottoman-Muslim type of the regime if not religious law. It is even stated by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan that "democracy is not an end, it is a means for us".¹⁶ Anti-intellectualism is also part of the main rhetoric of the JDP regime. "Monşer" is the phrase Erdoğan used to denigrate former bureaucrats who are said to be disconnected from the common people of Turkey. According to JDP hegemony, if you are detached from the common people, that is to say, not really one of them, you are naturally wrong. If you are using academic language while presenting some issues, you are wrong. Your discourses should be appropriate for the common people; the tone of speech and the content must be the same. As a JDP bureaucrat say openly:

I have nightmares now that the literacy rate [in Turkey] is rising. Those who will keep the country up and running are the ignorant people. The most dangerous folks, starting with the professors, are the university graduates. Those who can best analyze events are the primary school graduates. (Gençoğlu, 2020: 608.)

As I discussed above, anti-intellectualism can be broken down into anti-rationalism, populist anti-elitism, and unreflective instrumentalism. As for anti-rationalism, although many examples can be given, it can be said that the government's economic approaches rank first (Cumhuriyet, 2023). Trying to regulate the economy by using a section from the Holy Qur'an is not the only example; there are others in which the most basic tenets of economics are turned upside down. Anti-elitist populisms can be summarized by the account of Laclau forcefully. Gençoğlu (2023) says, following Laclau:

From this perspective, the creation of the collective identities of us and them (which is populism per se) is the most crucial aspect of a hegemonic relation. So, anti-intellectualism is taken here as a multidimensional phenomenon as the main axis of the existing hegemony that it uses to re-install itself. (2021)

Another point made by Gençoğlu grasps the topic of unreflective instrumentalism. In her classes she carries out a survey and finds that university students of such qualification think that an authoritarian government is needed to regulate the laws easily and comes to a conclusion promptly (609). In addition, many university lecturers, I believe, have heard the phrase "of what value would this be in real life?" This kind of instrumentalism leads to mediocre politics, and this inevitably leads to a shallowly governed state.

The current situation is such that political nonsense is repeatedly presented to the people of Turkey, and it is evident that this post-truth mechanism has worked in every single part. Unluckily I suggest (and realize only recently) that Nuri Bilge Ceylan intentionally or unintentionally follows such a path, and I will call it his rhetoric.

¹⁶ Cumhuriyet, 2016.

Nuri Bilge Ceylan's Rhetoric in *ADG* and Some Other Films

In his last interview with Stuart Liebman (2024), in response to a question related to politics, Ceylan says that he is not a political filmmaker and that "he does not like politics." (19) He also says that it is natural that people may draw some political conclusions from his films since "Turkey is a highly politicized country." (20) Further he openly declares that "Just like in real life, we try to pay attention to small details or very small expressions because we hope the audience will derive meaning from even the smallest things." (Liebman, 2022: 11). Therefore, knowing that people can draw politic conclusions from the scenes and since they notice every detail, it can be concluded that there can implicitly or explicitly some political points in his films. For Liebman (2022), "Paying attention to the extraordinary care [Ceylan] takes in framing, lighting, and staging also allows nuances of symbolic meaning to emerge." (11) In parallel, no matter symbolic or direct, I believe that political meaning is apparent in his films. Liebman also states that "Ceylan has generally avoided any direct engagement with contemporary Turkey's social and political problems, though careful exploration of his films reveals many glancing allusions to social anomie...." (11)

Having stated that Ceylan's style allows for a political and social analysis, it is time to turn to Ceylan's *ADG* (mainly) and some other films. In what follows, I examine, one by one, certain incidents, symbols or dialogues within *ADG* or other films that suggest an anti-intellectual and/or illiberal aura and/or attitude. After doing this, I will conclude with a general aspect of Ceylan's film-making explicitly or implicitly giving support to the claim that intellectuals are Turkey are detached from people or rather *quasi-intellectuals*.

(a) Winter: I believe that Ceylan uses winter for a specific purpose. With all its desperation and desolation, winter gives a mere negative feeling to his films. In *ADG* too, winter's effect on the audience can easily be associated with a designated negative mood. Cold weather, accompanied with narrow living spaces, gives the impression that human beings are trapped, and that they suffer both physically and mentally. Darragh O'Donoghue (2019) beautifully emphasizes the symbolic meaning of snow, referring to some scenes from another of Ceylan's films, *The Wild Pear Tree*:

...where it was at once a meteorological fact, a narrative deus ex machina, and an instance of pathetic fallacy, mirroring the soul of its emotionally wintry protagonist, a man in late middle age whose surface silver fox charm and need to dominate could not conceal a fear of emotional engagement. (65)

He has just stolen and sold his father's beloved hunting dog—valued as the one creature in the world that does not judge Idris—and used the proceeds to vanity-publish his book, not even giving money to his mother to buy food or pay off debts. He has snitched on his father, whom he mistakenly accuses of betting in the classroom (heartbreakingly, Idris has actually been drawing up a "lost dog" poster). It is surely no coincidence, therefore, that the snow begins to fall at this point of moral turpitude in a hitherto sun-drenched film. It is not heavy snow of the kind that causes chaos in *Winter Sleep*, but soft, slow, and persistent snow. Narrative space and time, already buckled through the film by the various assaults on "reality," completely breaks down at this point, and suddenly the meandering Sinan is performing his military service, trudging through snow in slow-paced Sokurovian



mode. The film's vicious circle is then traced in its final act, which repeats the setup of the first, with the prodigal son returning home to reckon with father. (65)

O'Donoghue, ties the use of snow and its melancholy with a short quote from James Joyce, and stresses its complete nothingness. (67) Maybe it is time to start something, or no starts occur in a field covered white. In *ADG*, the new beginnings only took place with the spring at the end of the film. Hence, it is not unfair to say that in almost all of the film (and in a few of Ceylan's other films too) we sense a detachment and a feeling of melancholy, which I think can be related to the detachment of the intellectual. Any fan of Ceylan would easily remember *Winter Sleep* and its gloomy atmosphere in which some so-called intellectuals' story is being told.

(b) The Image of Teachers as Intellectuals: Teachers, in Turkey, were seen as leading intellectual figures until the JDP came to power. After that, gradually, and more so after 2018, they have been accused of having lots of holidays and that they are not intellectually equipped. They are also considered to lack professionalism.

In *ADG* and in Ceylan's other films, the teacher's role is mostly associated with intellectualism, which seems to be, I think, *quasi-intellectualism*. Samet and Kenan are presented both as paedophiles and as disloyal to each other, lying to one another. Firdevs (Elit Andaç Çam) also belittles the village saying that "I cannot eat locally anymore" implying that the food causes nausea. The physical education teacher, Tolga (Erdem Şenocak), both does not keep his promise concerning the secrecy of the name of the student who complains, and lives in a very dirty place. Principal Bekir (Onur Berk Arslanoğlu) distance himself from the other teachers and he is also said to have gained his position by nepotism. Nuray seems inconsistent. It seems that only Kevser, the traditionalist teacher, is not presented in a bad light, which explicitly shows that non-traditionalist or secular teachers are contrasted with a traditional one. I consider this issue extremely controversial. Ceylan's attitude concerning the so-called detached intellectuals is very evident here. What flows from this anti-intellectualism may not be direct anti-Kemalism though. Ceylan, when showing Samet turning off the lights in the school building and focusing on the light diminishing from Atatürk's bust, tries to say that the teacher figures let Atatürk down.

(c) Blaming the Ignorant, Denigrating the Rural: Throughout the film, we twice see that Samet talks about stray dogs and says that they are hungry. He refers to the fact that civilized thought is missing in rural areas. He says, "You earn bread, but your dogs are hungry". This appears to mean that rural people are selfish and self-centred, lacking the dignity of civilized persons. He further says to the students, referring to them as villagers (meaning peasants), that "You'll plant potatoes and sugar beets so the rich can live comfortably." This seems to reflect the JDP's propaganda concerning intellectuals.

(d) No Leftist Accepted: In the midst of the film, Nuray asks Samet whether he and Kenan would like to come for dinner. He accepts but asks: "Won't there be a problem?" referring to the neighbourhood and men's visiting a woman's house. Nuray answers, stating that she has earned such rights through struggle. However, when Samet arrives, she asks whether anybody saw him entering the building. After that, being asked whether she wants to leave and go to a metropolitan city, she answers "My family is not ready to accept such an idea". At the dinner, Samet and Nuray get into a discussion, blaming one another about collectivity and intellectuals' position in Turkey. Samet accuses Nuray of being too hopeful, while Nuray calls

him a liberal. After that, Nuray's position somehow shifts, and she seems to like the phrase the "weariness of hope". Hence, we can easily observe that Nuray's position as a leftist is somehow shallow, and she does care about what her neighbours think. Moreover, she cannot confront her family and is not consistent in her ideas at all. At the end of the film, when Nuray comes to face Samet and Kenan, they insist on taking her back to the city in her own car, but she refuses, making a stand as a feminist, yet the stance only lasts a few minutes, and she comes back and seeks help. Therefore, Nuray, as an intellectual leftist woman, is represented as a traditional woman and a hypocrite.

(e) Loyalty: We see that no intellectual figure is loyal in *ADG*, not to one another or to others. Further, it seems to be implied that intellectuals lack morality and values. This completely reflects an illiberal agenda that would attribute importance to the family and values. It is also easy to see that our central figures are not married.¹⁷

(f) Unattached Persona: Most relevantly, our intellectual figures are also unattached to anything valuable. Samet says: "I've thought about nothing but leaving since the moment I arrived." They do not try to understand the people in the area, nor do they give importance to them. In addition, the rhetoric states that if they did, they would become attached, and things would probably change. It is not the villagers that are responsible, it is the intellectuals. They continuously criticize yet do nothing to change the situation.

(g) Lacking Emotion: These intellectuals, although they give lessons about empathy and compassion (as in the example of the starving dogs); are said to lack emotion. Kenan says: "I have a niece; I do not even show compassion to her". Therefore, they are not compassionate at all. They just seem to be so.

(h) Not Religiously Acceptable: Kevser, the traditionalist teacher is also said to have gathered the female students and told them to be careful when near male teachers. Hearing this, Samet comments: "It is not religiously acceptable (caiz), of course!" Here, we see that through Samet, religion is mocked, but since Samet is represented as a corrupt teacher and a paedophile, we can deduce narratively that his mocking is unjust and reflects Turkish intellectuals' snobbishness and opposition to religious values. Therefore, religious values are rhetorically defended in the film.

(i) General Rhetoric in Ceylan's Films: It can be speculated that Ceylan's films, in general, contain a kind of rhetoric that goes well with anti-intellectualism or illiberalism. Looking backwards, *The Wild Pear Tree* can be said to have some. The father figure is a gambler and a teacher, while the hero Sinan is a wannabe writer who seems to refute his own land's values but writes about himself. He, at the end, appears to find peace in his village, which he had been cursing. Hence the film can be read, speculatively, as a modernism criticism.¹⁸

Winter Sleep's rhetoric is rather apparent. If one has to say something about intellectual/rural tension and how rural people are morally supreme, we can analyze the scenes in which the Imam takes the child to say sorry to Aydın. Further, Nihal's meeting with İsmail reflects the same tone, hitting its highest point when İsmail throws the money into the fire.

¹⁷ See. Hürriyet, 2014. And Anadolu Ajansı, 2024.

¹⁸ This line of thought is present in the work by Çamudaş, 2021.



In *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*, there are two figures that deserve attention: Cemal and Nusret, doctor and prosecutor. Cemal lies in the end; and Nusret disregards family values, cheating on his wife and causing her suicide.

(j) Documentarist Cinema: Ceylan's films are said to be documentarist.¹⁹ However, when viewed through such rhetoric as I represented in this paper, the films are far from being documentarist. Such documentarist style can only be called propaganda, and this propaganda, although we do not know whether it is intentional or not, may support the current government's illiberal politics.²⁰

Conclusion

In this paper, I claim that Nuri Bilge Ceylan, intentionally or unintentionally has a rhetoric that supports the current political agenda of the Turkish government, which is rather apparent in his latest film *About Dry Grasses*. In the second section of the paper, I briefly explained the plot and the characters of *ADG*. In the third section, I explored the notions of illiberalism and anti-Intellectualism. The fourth section dealt with the Turkish case, considering illiberal and anti-intellectual agendas. And in the fifth section, I presented my argument that Nuri Bilge Ceylan employs rhetoric which is apparent in *ADG* and some of his other recent films. I suggested that his rhetoric paves the way for the illiberal and anti-intellectual thought promoting the current government's discourse.

References:

- ANADOLU AJANSI. (2024). Üreme Sağlığı ve İnfertilite Derneği'nden Doğurganlık Oranını Artırmak İçin En Az 3 Çocuk Önerisi. <https://www.aa.com.tr/tr/saglik/ureme-sagligi-ve-infertilite-derneginden-dogurganlik-oranini-artirmak-icin-en-az-3-cocuk-onerisi-/3435985>
- ARISTOTLE. (2017). *De Anime*. Hackett Publishing, USA.
- BBC NEWS. (2017). Guardian: AKP, Türkiye'de LGBTİ Hakları Hareketinin Faaliyetlerini Engellemeye Çalışıyor. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/haberler-turkiye-42062152>
- BBC NEWS. (2023). Bu Milletin Aile Kurumu Sağlamdır, Bu Milletten LGBT'ci Çıkmaz. <https://www.bbc.com/turkce/articles/cd1rylgypz2o>
- BEERBOHM, E. (2017). Must Rawlsians be Hamiltonians? Small Government and Political Illiberalism. *The American Journal of Jurisprudence*, 62 (1), 21-28. doi:10.1093/ajj/aux015
- BLOKKER, P. (2005). Populist Nationalism, Anti- Europeanism, Post-nationalism, and the East- West Distinction. *German Law Journal*. 6 (2): 371-389.
- BUGÜN. (2020). Erdoğan'ın "Bu Millete Yakışmıyor" Deddiği Netflix Türkiye'de Ofis Açma Kararı Aldı. <https://www.birgun.net/haber/erdogan-in-bu-millete-yakismiyor-dedigi-netflix-turkiye-de-ofis-acma-karari-aldi-325260>
- CEYLAN, N. B. (2006). *Climates*.
- CEYLAN, N. B. (2011). *Once Upon a Time in Anatolia*.
- CEYLAN, N. B. (2014). *Winter Sleep*.
- CEYLAN, N. B. (2018). *The Wild Pear Tree*.
- CEYLAN, N. B. (2023). *On Dry Grasses*.
- CULLOTY, E., SUITER, J. (2022). Media Control and Post-truth Communication. In In Sajo, A., Uitz, R., Holmes S. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*. Newgen Publishing, UK. 365-383.

¹⁹ Scognamiglio in Sayıcı, 2011.

²⁰ It seems that these points which are represented by letters a to j are related to the points 1 to 5 I mentioned above as such: a seems related to 1; b to 4 and 5; c to 3,4 and 5; d to 1,2 and 5; e to 4 and 5; f to 1 and 5; g to 2 and 5; h to 1,3,4 and 5; j to 4.

- CUMHURİYET. (2016). Cumhurbaşkanı Recep Tayyip Erdoğan İstanbul Belediye Başkanı Olduğu Dönemde Yaptığı Bir Konuşmada "Demokrasi Bizim İçin Amaç Değil Araçtır." Demişti. <https://www.cumhuriyet.com.tr/video/recep-tayyip-erdogan-demokrasi-bizim-icin-amac-degil-aractir-509140>
- ÇAMURDAŞ, K. (2021). Kendilik Bahsi ve “Ahlat Ağacı” Filminde Modernite Eleştirisi. *Atebe*. 6, 1-18.
- DİKEN. (2018). Erdoğan Övündü: Bziimle Beraber Grev Denilen Olaylar Ortadan Kalktı. <https://www.diken.com.tr/erdogandan-akplilere-bu-davanin-sonuna-mal-mulk-san-sohret-bekleyen-yanilir/>
- ENGELLİWEB. (2023). Türkiye’de Adaletsizliğin Sembolü: Sulh Ceza Hakimlikleri ve İnternet Sansürleri. https://ifade.org.tr/reports/EngelliWeb_2023.pdf
- EURONEWS. (2023). Erdoğan’ın Cumhurbaşkanlığı Zaferi Sonrası “LGBTQ+ Toplumunda Korku Katlanarak Arttı”. <https://tr.euronews.com/2023/05/29/erdoganin-cumhurbaskanligi-zaferi-sonrasi-lgbtq-toplumunda-korku-katlanarak-artti>
- GENÇOĞLU, F. (2020). On the Construction of Identities: An Autoetnography from Turkey. *International Political Science Review*. 41 (4), 600-612.
- GENÇOĞLU, F. (2023). Once There Was and Once There Wasn’t: The Tale of Intellectuals and the State in Turkey. *Third World Quarterly*. 44 (9), 2098-2114. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2023.2219607>
- GEZGİN, E. (2019). Türkiye’de Neo-liberal Devletin İnşa ve Muhafazasında Çanakkale Savaşı Söyleminin Rolü Üzerine Bir Tartışma. *İdealkent*. 10 (26), 340-373. doi.org/10.31198/idealkent.521968
- HALMAI, G. (2019). Populism, Authoritarianism and Constitutionalism. *German Law Journal* 20 (3): 296-313.
- HOLMES, S. (2022). The Anti-liberal Idea. In Sajo, A., Uitz, R., Holmes S. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*. Newgen Publishing, UK. 3-15.
- HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH. (2024). <https://www.hrw.org/europe/central-asia/turkey>
- HURRİYET. (2014). Erdoğan’dan Bahçeli’ye: O Aile Nedir Bilmez. <https://www.hurriyet.com.tr/video/erdogan-dan-bahceli-ye-o-aile-nedir-bilmez-36087911>
- KAOS GL. (2016). LGBT’lilere Ayrımcılık Yapan İnsan Hakları Kurumu Resmi Gazetede. <https://kaosgl.org/haber/lgbtirsqolere-ayrimcilik-yapan-insan-haklari-kurumu-resmi-gazetersquode>
- LAVERGHETTA, A., STEWART, J., WEINSTEIN, L. (2007). Anti-Intellectualism and Political Ideology In a Sample of Undergraduate and Graduate Students. *Psychological Reports*. 101, 1050-1056.
- LIEBMAN, S. (2022). Truth and Melancholia in Anatolia: The Films of Nuri Bilge Ceylan. *Cineaste*. Winter, 10-17.
- LIEBMAN, S. (2024). Draw What You Know Well: An Interview with Nuri Bilge Ceylan. *Cineaste*. Spring, 16-23.
- MERRIAM WEBSTER DICTIONARY. (2024). <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/illiberalism>
- O’DONOUGHE, D. (2019). The Wild Pear Tree. *Cineaste*. Fall, 64-69.
- OKLOPCIC, Z. (2022). The Illiberal Potential of People. In Sajo, A., Uitz, R., Holmes S. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*. Newgen Publishing, UK. 218-236.
- PAPPIN, G. (2022). Contemporary Christian Criticism of Liberalism. In Sajo, A., Uitz, R., Holmes S. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*. Newgen Publishing, UK. 43-59.
- RIGNET, D. (1991). Three Kinds of Anti-Intellectualism: Rethinking Hofstadter. *Sociological Inquiry*. 61 (4), 434-451.
- RTÜK. (2018). Televizyon İzleme Alışkanlıkları Araştırması. <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/Media/FM/Birimler/Kamuoyu/televizyonizlemeegilimleriarastirmasi2018.pdf>
- RTÜK. (2022). Geçici Yayın Yasağı Kararı. <https://www.rtuk.gov.tr/gecici-yayin-yasagi-karari-/4395>



- SAJO, A., UITZ, R., HOLMES S. (2022). *Routledge Handbook of Illiberalism*. Newgen Publishing, UK.
- SAYICI, F. (2011). 1990 Sonrası Türk Sinemasında Gerçekçilik. Konya Selçuk University, MA thesis, Konya.
- SCHEPPELE, K. L. (2018). Autocratic Legalism. *University of Chicago Law Review*. 85 (2): 545-583.
- SIMPSON, P. L. P. (2015). *Political Illiberalism: A Defence of Freedom*. Transaction Publishers, UK.