

A Romantic Poet: After an Impossible Aesthetic

İmkansız Estetiğin Peşindeki Romantik Şair

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Abstract

Although the first examples of Turkish novels began to be written in the second half of the 19th century as a kind of adaptation from the western literature, it followed a much more different route than that of the western novel. The first Turkish novelists were generally classical poets of the Ottoman Empire. Despite this belatedness, Turkish novel proved itself to be able to cope up with the new novel movements emerged again in the West. In the turn of the century, Turkish novelists began to write technically excellent novels. In the 1930s, when the Soviet literature was in search of establishing a literary tradition according to the Marxist point of view, Turkish writers triggered the arguments regarding this new method in Turkey, as well. In this article, Nazım Hikmet's, a well-known Turkish poet, views about the novel as were conveyed to Kemal Tahir through his letters are explored.

Key Words: Nazım Hikmet, Socialist Realism, Kemal Tahir, Turkish Novel

Özet

Türk romanı, kendi muadili olan Batılı örneklerinden çok daha farklı bir yol izlemiştir. 19. asrın ikinci yarısından itibaren tercüme ve adaptasyonlar aracılığı ile Türk okurunun tanıştığı roman, özellikle Divan şiiri geleneğinden gelen şairler öncülüğünde gelişim göstermiştir. Toplumsal gelişimin doğrudan doğruya doğal bir süreç olmanın ötesinde, bu dönem yazar ve şairlerin, Batıda gördükleri bu türden etkilenmeleri sonucu ortaya çıkmıştır roman. 20. Asrın ilk yarısında özellikle Sosyalist Gerçekçiliğin Sovyetler'de ortaya çıkması ile birlikte Nazım Hikmet bu akımın roman ile ilgili ortaya attığı düşünceleri Türk romanına taşımak istemiş ve hapisanede iken Kemal Tahir'e yazdığı mektuplarında bu görüşlere sık sık yer vermiştir. Bu makalede, Nazım Hikmet'in, Kemal Tahir'e yazdığı mektuplarda bulunan roman ile ilgili düşünceleri incelenecektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Nazım Hikmet, Sosyalist Gerçekçilik, Kemal Tahir, Türk Romanı

Introduction

In the middle of the 19th century, one of the biggest and at the same time drastic shifts in entire Turkish history has been from Eastern culture to the Western one. This drastic transition has not been experienced only in the public sphere; its radical effects have changed the direction of Turkish literature as well. In the second half of the 19th century, Turkish literature started to give new examples in some new literary genres with quite new themes that have not been treated by the Turkish writers and poets before. Although, it is almost impossible to treat this literature of the period without taking into consideration the social, cultural, political and intellectual atmosphere under which this new literary tradition made its appearance, the main objective of this article is not to discuss what happened in 19th century of the Empire in the political, cultural and social level. When the Turks decided to create a new life style, Turkish literature naturally tried to cope with the requirements of these newly adopted changes.

Ahmet Ö. Evin's sentences could be helpful to make the situation clear: "[l]iterature was to be a medium for social mobilization. Accordingly, new genres were introduced and traditional ones were transformed" (Evin, 1983, 11). This mission of the literature of the 19th century played a critical role in shaping the new forms and themes of the Turkish literature and the mentality of the writers as well. Therefore, both the writers and the literature had multiple missions, the mission of creating new literary forms and of disseminating the new ideas by employing new themes transformed from primarily French literature. Among the other literary genres, novel was the most dominating and multi-functional genre of the time, adopted from French literature. This disseminating mission of the novel, I believe, has always been one of the strongest character of the Turkish novel even after the establishment of the Republic.

It won't be an exaggeration to claim that Turkish literature has been a poetry based literature for hundreds of years. Being treated by many gifted poets for many centuries, the Turkish language has been unsurprisingly a highly developed figurative language. Therefore, by the middle of the 19th century, Turkish literature has formed a very strong poetic tradition.

Simultaneously with the westernization movement of the Ottoman Empire in the first part of the 19th century, Turkish literature started to generate a novel tradition in the western sense. After many examples of translation and adaptation especially from French literature, the first original novel in Turkish emerged in the beginning of the 20th century. In other words, when the novel as a genre proclaimed its triumph over other literary genres in the 19th century in Europe, Turkish literature just began to produce

the first original examples. Most of these novels, however, were nothing but adaptations of well known European examples.

In spite of the domination of poetry, the first initiators of the attempt to develop the Turkish novel were again, interestingly the poets, most of whom had a very highly disciplined classical poetry background. Because of this historical fact, many theoretical and rhetorical problems of this new novel tradition have been raised, discussed or tried to be resolved by these poets. Ahmet Evin cites in his book a sentence by Namık Kemal who had his reputation not only because of his political views on the problems of the time but also because of the thoughts on the technical problems of the new Turkish novel of the time. "In an article published in 1866" he noted that "meaning ought not be sacrificed for art" because "a great utility of discourse ... is its service in the proper education of a nation" (Evin, 1983, 11). Because of many political and other reasons, as Kemal indicates, for intellectuals and writers the content of the literary works were much more important than rhetoric. This role of being a proper educative means became the chief feature of the Turkish novel. For Jale Parla along with this role, early Turkish novelists ascribed a new role to the novel. She says:

Like other institutions adopted in the course of westernization movements, the novel was imitated with circumspection, according to the models emerged in the West. The novel writer played an innovative and reformist role, however, paternalism has always been ahead of his reformism. According to the novel writer, there were the people who needed to be educated, and the culture without a curator, was in need of a new one (Parla, 2002, 13-14).

Paradoxically or maybe quite naturally, even after the modern Turkish novelists started to give very well examples of modern novels, some prominent poets were still preoccupied with the theoretical and rhetorical problems of the Turkish novel. Nazım Hikmet was one of these poets who undertook an instructor role to illuminate the young generation of the writers on the subject of the new novel method developed in the Soviet Union in the 1930's. Hikmet was born in Salonica of Ottoman Empire (now Thessalonica). He was given a long prison sentence for his Marxist political views and activities. After he was released from the prison in 1950, he fled to the Soviet Union in 1951 and lived in different socialist countries until he died in Moscow in 1963. So, in this work I hope to shed some light on Nazim Hikmet's understandings of the theory of the novel, and to clear away some of the confusions surrounding his name, confusions that can bring about and nourish some myths.

Hikmet and Novel

Even though he gained his popularity all over the world because of his political activities and his new style poems, Hikmet wrote four novels called *Kan Konuşmaz* (Blood does not Speak), *Yeşil Elmalar* (Green Apples), *Yaşamak Hakkı* (Right to Live), *Yaşamak Güzel Şey* be *Kardeşim* (My Brother, Living is Beautiful). Interestingly, since he was aware of the fact that these novels had no literary value, except the last one, Hikmet published them under his pen name, Orhan Selim. The first one was a serial novel published in a newspaper; the second novel was also published in a newspaper in 1938. Hikmet could not have the opportunity to put the last touches on *Right to Live*. The last novel has an interesting story. Having been published in the Soviet Union in 1963, it came into sight in some other socialist countries as well. These four novels have never brought about new perspectives and changed the course of the novel in Turkey. Mehmet Fuat's, a prominent literary critic, account seems quite satisfactory to find the real motivation of such a prominent writer to write such insignificant novels. He says "Besides his articles in *Akşam* [a newspaper], in order to make a little bit more money, in *Son Posta* he wrote a serial novel called *Kan Konuşmaz* [Blood does not Speak] where he fought against fascism and racism under his pen name Orhan Selim" (Fuat, 2000; 205). Another critic Demirtaş Ceyhun gives more detailed information regarding Hikmet's novels. "It is impossible to doubt about the fact that he wrote these three novels in order to make money. (...) As Hikmet regarded this involuntary authorship (being novelist) as a burden, he never thought to rewrite a novel even though he had more serious financial difficulties in those long prison years. (...) It is interesting that he did not allow his novels, which had been published in newspapers under his pen name Orhan Selim, to be republished with his real name throughout the following years" (Ceyhun, 1996, 158).

I mention these novels neither to point out their roles in the history of Turkish novel, nor to justify the literary value of them and the literary capacity of the writer; instead, these novels have a significance for us to comprehend Hikmet's interests in writing novels or to make clear his historical struggle in canalizing the tradition of Turkish prose fictions into a new direction. In other words, they have a potential to tell the fact that Hikmet's literary world is not one dimensional, and that the life of a renowned writer is not necessarily the story of a complete success. He cannot be justified because of these novels to which he never devoted all of his time and energy. Therefore, instead of devoting our energy to analyzing these novels, exploring the inspirations that Hikmet's theoretical advices have created on other young writers' works is of much more significance;

because of this reality I am going to differentiate his theoretical approaches from these novels for more reliable argument.

I will primarily make use of Hikmet's letters written in different prisons between 1940 and 1950 to Kemal Tahir, a young Turkish novelist¹ of that time. Since he expressed his ideas on literary arguments along with his daily individual feelings in these letters, they have quite noteworthy place in Turkish literature. He designated these letters as texts full of literary messages by means of which Hikmet aimed at educating the young writer according to his own personal perception of literature. He took this liberty of assigning the role of a teacher to himself. In a letter to Kemal Tahir, he said "from now on Raşit Kemal² will be the last individual whom I helped a lot. So far, you are my unique and great achievement. You can not imagine how it would please me if he became like you. That is why, while reading his short stories and poems I am as demanding and critical as I was when I read yours" (Hikmet, 2002; 173). These words draw attentions to his role in directing and motivating the young generations, and in shaping the literary tastes of them in the history of Turkish novel.

In order to understand completely the real logic of this relationship, it is necessary to explain first the main literary movement or philosophy on which Hikmet based his literary instructions. The fact that he studied sociology and economics at the University of Moscow (1921-28) and joined the Turkish Communist Party in the 1920s played important roles in developing his own literary and political understandings. Moreover, since he knew Russian he was able to follow what was going on in the literary sphere of his time in the USSR. Some sections in his letters to Tahir would explain clearly his real philosophy that motivated his literary judgments. He wrote:

The modern realism in literature is the conscious practice of the dialectical materialism in literary area. This philosophical approach accepts the de facto relationship between the novelist and the subject. (...) According to dialectic materialist philosophy, it is necessary to see the concrete and psychological events in their own progress. A realist writer needs to present the events in this course. You will say that Balzac was a big

¹ Kemal Tahir was also imprisoned between 1938 and 1950 because of his political activities. He wrote many important historical novels in Turkey. He was born in Istanbul in 1910, and died in 1973. Some of his works are: *Sağır Dere* (Deaf Valley), *Esir Şehrin İnsanları*, (People of the Captive City), *Köyün Kamburu* (Hunchback of the Village), *Esir Şehrin Mahpusu* (People of the Captive Prison), *Yorgun Savaşçı* (Tired Warrior), *Bozkırdaki Çekirdek* (Seed in the Steppe), *Devlet Ana* (Mother State), *Karılar Koğuşu* (Women Ward), *Hür Şehrin İnsanları* (People of the Free City).

² Another Turkish writer who spent some times with Nazim Hikmet in the same prison. He is known in Turkey as Orhan Kemal.

realist. But he was philosophically not a dialectic materialist. (...) The difference between realist Balzac and a realist of this time like Kemal Tahir, is that the former did unconsciously what he has done but the latter is doing consciously (Hikmet, 2002; 51-52).

From these statements we can infer that Hikmet was teaching Tahir the fundamental principals of socialist realism. Interestingly, in the 1930s, there were some other attempts to clarify the future direction of Turkish literature. For example, Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoglu, a famous writer, has been known for his inclinations towards the Soviet Union. His wife, Leman Karaosmanoglu, says “On an order of Ataturk, Yakup Kadri and Falih Rifki went to Moscow for the International Leftist Writers Congress in 1932” (Savaşır, 1987;133-139). In that conference, Yakup Kadri presented an article in French in which he publicized his ideas on new literary arguments. He maintains that:

We feel, we see and we are sure that a revolution has taken place in all of our souls. We expect something new from the poets and artists. But what is that thing? We do not know it yet very well” (Karaosmanoğlu, 1934; 27) and he adds “so, in order for a great cultural era it is necessary to have thinkers who will prepare the revolution; revolution must be victorious; structuration must be started and developed; the new value system must be balanced. That is to say, to start the period of superstructure, all matters belonging to the substructure must be resolved (Karaosmanoğlu, 1934; 29).

These offers indicate that during the 1930s and 1940s, Turkish writers were trying to cope with the new literary movements in the world. And due to the geographical position, movements in the Soviet Union had more chance to find a quick echo in Turkey. Within this search, Hikmet’s place had a significant role. Since he knew Russian and Marxism very well, he was able to follow what was going on in the Soviet Union at that time. At this point, I must point out an important issue in relation to the search on new literary movements. Although both Hikmet and Yakup Kadri were preoccupied with the literary arguments in the Soviet Union, neither of them articulated the name, socialist realism. In this respect, Katerina Clark says “Socialist Realism as such did not exit until the revolution was at least fifteen years old, for the term was not presented to the Soviet public until 1932. The first record of its use is in a speech made by Gronsky, the president of the organization committee of the newly founded Writers’ Union on May 17, 1932” (Clark, 2000; 27). In the same book she explains that although its name has been coined, the theory of Socialist Realism was not formulated until 1934.

Given the fact that Hikmet wrote those letters after 1940, we saw that it has already been eight years since the theory has been named. So, why he hesitated to call this movement with its internationally known name? He preferred generally different names such as “modern realism in literature” (Hikmet, 2002; 51), “active, influential, educative, creative realism”, “new realist literature” (Hikmet, 2002; 46), and “active, revolutionary, or propagandist realism...” (Hikmet, 2002; 266) In Turkish literature, other different names like Sosyal (Social) or Toplumcu³ Realism have been dominantly employed.

In my opinion, Hikmet was aware of the name for sure, but due to political considerations he consciously did not state the term Socialist Realism. Since he was in the prison, his letters have been delivered after they were read by the prosecutor of the prison. Given all these reasons, it seems quite reasonable for him not to employ the term Socialist Realism.

Even though he did not overtly express the term, from his suggestions we easily recognize that he was trying to establish a literature according to the principals of Socialist Realism. His words regarding Maxim Gorky’s *Mother* would provide us with his connection to Socialist Realism. Hikmet said

Today, I read Gorky’s *Mother* in just one attempt and who knows how many times I have read it. There cannot be a worse translation than this one in the world. However, the thing with a firm essence does not lose anything even if one puts it in a terrible form. My great Gorky! Especially reading *Mother* in such days makes one cry out of happiness and hope. I am not exaggerating; I cried almost after each page. Only heroes who are worthy of being written are his heroes and their children and grandchildren. The *Idiot*, in which Dostoyevsky talks about people who are not worthy of mentioning, is a vain effort despite all of its artistry; one sided, unproductive and stillborn (Hikmet, 2002; 163).

Selecting Gorky’s *Mother* as an example of the new novel movement is indicating that Hikmet knew the new direction that the novel in the Soviet Union took in the 1930s. I think the following statements of Clark would be quite explanatory to comprehend the significant place of *Mother* in the history of Socialist Realism and the connection of the Hikmet’s statements with it.

³ In Turkish “Toplumcu” means literally Socialist, but it does never evoke the connotations of Socialism.

Most Soviet historians describe *Mother* as the novel that spawned numberless Socialist Realist progeny. This metaphor, though appropriate to the book's title, does not take into account *Mother's* relationship to the earlier revolutionary fiction. I prefer to use another, borrowed from Pushkin, who once described translators as the "post-horses of civilization." *Mother* was that post, or station, where Bolsheviks coming out of the old intelligentsia tradition were able to stop and take on fresh horses to bear them on into Socialist Realism (Clark, 2000: 52).

Clark's another account on this issue would be a good source for us to connect Hikmet's interests in *Mother* with its historical position in Socialist Realist novel. She puts out that "The plot formula Gorky worked out for *Mother* (i.e., the disciple acquires the likeness of the mentor and hence acquires 'consciousness') proved so efficient for structuring any novel as a parable of historical progress that it became the basis for Socialist Realism's master plot" (Clark, 2000; 65). Therefore, saying that Hikmet was suggesting the very starting point of Socialist Realism to Kemal Tahir would not be an unsubstantiated claim. What is the importance of this claim? To me, it is important because it clearly indicates that although Hikmet was one of the prominent pioneers of the modern Turkish poetry and his suggestions on the new direction of the modern poetry still keep their actuality, his anticipations about the route of the new novel are not quite accurate. For instance, Tahir became one of the most eminent writers in Turkey not because of his novels in which he followed the strictly formulated proposals of Socialist Realism; contrarily, he had his reputation mainly because of the historical novels where Tahir based his ideas generally on the reexamination of Turkish history. Even though Hikmet advised him to focus on the relationship between the poor and rich villagers, and to take vestiges of the feudal lords and class struggles into consideration, unfortunately we have no ideas on his responses, since Hikmet did not keep Tahir's letters. However, with his novels he tried to prove that as oppose to the western societies, Turkish society had no class struggle, and in his late novels, instead of classes he put the state forward as the unifying and protecting authority. The reason why I am mentioning all these statements is that Hikmet's advices on the theory of novel has not been quite influential on Tahir, and he has not been a loyal student.

The following assessments would point out that Hikmet was trying to teach him to create literary characters like Pavel in Gorky's *Mother*. "It is necessary to give the main [literary] characters of the socialist era and the era of the victory of the socialism, who typically represent, as an example, the newly founded world by synthesizing and abstracting in [their own]

personality” (Hikmet, 2002; 264). It is not quite challenging to decipher what kind of literary person he was planning to describe: he is Pavel, the main person of Gorky’s *Mother*, who is usually held to be the first of example of Socialist Realist novel.

Above, I mentioned that Hikmet attached very much importance to class struggle in order to be able to create Socialist Realist novel; however, Tahir’s interpretation of history was different than that of Hikmet. Tahir did not based examination of history upon the well known formula of historical materialism. He believed that:

The Ottomans did not experience the stages of feudality, and capitalism. (...) In other words, the state owned the soil which was the means of production, and since there was not private property, individuals could not collect wealth. Because of this fact, the Ottoman society was a classless society (Moran, 2003;174).

Instead of basing his novels on class struggle, he preferred to write historical novels where this preference “caused him to evaluate the society in a [certain] historical period” (Moran, 2003;175). These are the main points on which two writers did not agree.

In one of his letter, Hikmet expressed some of his other ideas on the role of the new novel that he was trying to define. He wrote: “In my opinion, the most important point that the new realist literature needed to take into account was its efficiency, its instructive and directive role in order to make the readers more effective in practical life” (Hikmet, 2002; 46). In the same page, he borrowed Gorky’s famous words to distinguish the socialist realist writers. He called them “the engineer of the souls” Hikmet, 2002; 46). Some of the meanings of being an engineer of the souls are to work on the souls, to change or to reshape, and to redirect them to a ready-made route. However, while Hikmet was aiming to have such roles, Tahir again followed another direction. Berna Moran asserts that “He exhibits the life in a village, the reality and problems of the village in order not to represent and solve them, he talks about them to ascertain the certain changes - happened in the society - in the light of his theoretical background which he learned from his historical research” (Moran, 2003;176). Therefore, it is a well known fact that educating the masses became one of the cornerstones of Socialist Realism, and the idea behind the new novel that should show the way towards socialism. As it has been seen, Hikmet’s suggestions were instructing Tahir for the same ideal; however, Tahir’s literary practices proved that Hikmet was not as influential as he was believed.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore Hikmet's place in the course of Turkish literature. His place as a poet is unquestionably firm, but his interpretation of novel is a story of failure. Even though he was able to follow the new routes of the novel in the 1930s, Hikmet overtook the fact that each society has their own historical and societal realities and the novel has directly a strong connection with these realities. His romanticism about the projection of Socialist Realist theory was the main reason for thinking that all imperatives of Socialist Realism would be applicable in all societies.

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