

Revolution and Modernity in Nazim Hikmet's "The Epic of Sheikh Bedridden"

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Abstract

This paper aims to prove that the poem "The Epic of Sheikh Bedridden" by the first Turkish modernist poet Nazim Hikmet expresses a political unconscious of modernity by incarnating and adopting modernist, rebellious and revolutionary ideas in his poem in both form and content in order to subjugate repression and oppression. Throughout his didactic poem he urges his people for a better Turkey whose freedom of thought and expression and liberty are essential ideals. Hikmet's proposal for a more tolerant and open Turkey becomes undeniable truth after a long history of contestation through the power of the words.

Key Words: Revolution, Modernity, Turkey, Poetry

الثورة والحداثة في قصيدة "ملحمة شيخ بدر الدين" لناظم حكمت
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المخلص :

يهدف هذا البحث إلى التوكيد على أن قصيدة "ملحمة شيخ بدر الدين" للشاعر التركي الحدائي الأول ناظم حكمت تعبر عن لوعي سياسي للحداثة من خلال تجسيد وتبني أفكارا ثورية متمردة حدائية من حيث الشكل والمضمون بغيت التخلص من الكبت والاضطهاد. ويحث حكمت من خلال قصيدته التعليمية هذه شعبه من اجل صناعة تركيا أفضل تكون فيها حرية الفكر والتعبير والتحرر أهم مبادئها و قيمها. وأصبح مقترح حكمت للدعوة إلى تركيا أكثر تسامحا و انفتاحا حقيقة لايمكن إنكارها بعد تاريخ طويل من الجدل من خلال سطوة الكلمات ونفوذها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثورة ، الحداثة ، تركيا ، الشعر

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Freedom of speech and freedom of thought are necessary to all nations. Their existence gives the opportunity to different currents of thought to express their ideas and notions so as to develop both the country and the individual. Turkey witnessed huge changes in its strategies after the declaration of the republic in 1923. Mustafa Kemal, who is known as Atatürk, drew the form and the characteristics for the new Turkey. He changed it into a secular state and orientated his country and people towards the western civilization. He directed them to a new kind of power—the power of reason and knowledge. He imitated the European model of modernity and especially the French model. This impressive change in policy, form, content and orientation has made Turkey a great country, and, absolutely, there is a positive transformation inside the Turkish society. At the same time, such radical changes, had a bad consequence inside the new republic. Repression, oppression and restriction on the freedom of speech and freedom of thought were evident at that time in Turkey.

This paper argues that the poem "The Epic of Sheikh Bedridden" by the Turkish Marxist communist poet Nazim Hikmet expresses a political unconsciousness of modernity by embodying and adopting rebellious, revolutionary and modernist ideas in his poem both in content and form. It looks back to the past as a source of inspiration in order to excite the Turks to rebel and revolt against the repression imposed by authority upon them. Also, it looks forward to free them from the shackles which restrict their ability to invent and generate new ideas for Turkey in order to make it better than before and improve its picture worldwide.

The present paper adopts the Marxist method of analyzing the literary text which states that the text has an overt (surface) meaning and as well as a covert (hidden) meaning. The covert meaning is the crucial one because it is related to basic Marxist themes of class struggle, or the progression of society through different historical stages, such as the transformation from feudal to bourgeois. Nazim Hikmet was born in January 15, 1902 in Salonika, the same city where Atatürk had been born twenty years earlier. He was eager to compose poetry at an early age and had his first poems published when he was seventeen. Unlike Atatürk he came from a prosperous family. When his illness forced him to leave the naval academy, he chose to follow his other passion, poetry. He joined the Communist party after his visit to Moscow in 1922. He saw no contradiction between his love of Turkey and his Marxist convictions, but the authorities did. His talent proved no defense against persecution, and he spent the rest of his life in trouble with the law. After receiving early recognition for his

patriotic poems in syllabic meter, he abandoned traditional forms while attempting to [*depoetize*] poetry, that's why he is considered the first modern Turkish poet. Most of his works have been translated into English, including *Human Landscapes from My Country: An Epic Novel in Verse* (2009), *Things I Didn't Know I Loved* (1975), *The Day Before Tomorrow* (1972). Hikmet died of a heart attack in Moscow in 1963.

Bedreddin was born in 1364 AD. His studies eventually led him to Cairo, where he taught the son of Sultan Barquq. During the interregnum following the defeat of Beyazit I, by Timur, Sheikh Bederddin served Beyazit's son Musa in Rumelia as a high legal counselor. When another son, Mehmet, defeated Musa in 1413, he reunited the Ottoman Empire. Bederddin was banished to Iznik. In spite of his exile, he persisted to write in order to prepare for the uprising. His writing suggests a substitute religious and social doctrine. It presupposes socialist, progressive and enlightened notions. It states that ownership is to be shared publicly, and the differences among Muslims, Christians and Jews are to be erased and considered as valueless.

The revolution of 1416 is thought to have begun near Karaburun under the command of Borkluce Mustafa. Bederddin then went to Wallachia (known in Hikmet's epic by the regional names of Deliorman and Agacdeniz), where he led a rebellion. He was captivated and executed in Serres in December of 1416 or in 1420, but his followers known as Bederddinlis or Simvanis, endured for several centuries and were viewed warily by the Ottoman Empire.

The fourteen poems of Hikmet's epic follow the sequence of events described above, beginning with Mehmet's triumphal celebration (poem one) and Bedreddine's exile (poems 2 and 3) and continuing with Mustafa's revolt in Karaburun (poem 4) and Bedreddine's flight across the sea to Deliorman (poems 6 and 7). Poem nine treats the defeat of Mustafa's forces. Poem 14 concludes the epic with a description of the Serres market where Bedreddine's body hangs from a tree. (Crofoot, 2001:93-94)

Hikmet embodies in his poem, through the figures of the rebels, modernist and revolutionary ideas. As Cinar (2005) argues, modernist idea means "A critical attitude taken towards the present so as to overcome its limitation" (Cinar, 2005:22). Hikmet, in his poem criticizes the lack of freedom in his country and especially the freedom of thought and speech. Actually, in the context of the Turkish republic, Ataturk used excessive power in order to defeat and prevent any opposition against his authority. Moreover, in his secular state, he erased all the traces which denoted the past of the Ottoman Empire. For example, a large number of citizens were executed because they resisted Ataturk's decision which prevented wearing

the fez, a red head cap which people used to wear during the Ottoman period. In this sense the Dutch Turkology Eric-jan Zurcher (1994) explained that “The Independence Tribunals played their part in suppressing this resistance. Under the Law of the Maintenance of Order nearly 7500 people were arrested and 660 executed” (Zurcher, 1994 :181). Hikmet (2002) gives his readers a parallel image in his poem when Mustafa, Sheikh Bedridden’s disciple, lost 8000 of his army in the battle against the authority /But when the day descended into night in pouring rain/The ten thousand were two thousand.

This brutality and savagery should not be used to end a revolution or to impose a law upon the people. That's why Hikmet states that he cannot bear this bloodshed of the Turks because of unreasonable justifications. Undoubtedly, he criticizes Ataturk’s notion of using such kind of power against some Turks in order to impose his control in the new Turkey. In other words, he wants to say that being a modernist certainly doesn’t mean to be so drastic against the Turks. Hikmet (2002) expresses his refusal against the use of the brutal means against opposition. In this case, Attaturk the modern leader of the present in the new Turkey uses the same means of repression as the despot in the past during the Ottoman Empire.

In addition, he uses a modern political language in his poem when he says:

Don't say
It's the necessary result
Of historical, social and economic conditions-
I know!
My head bows before the thing you mention.
But my heart
Doesn't speak that language.

(Hikmet,2002:60-61).

He gives us a Marxist principle or slogan. In fact, being a Marxist for some people means a human being who is only interested and engaged in economical profits. He/she is a materialistic who doesn't know anything about the human feelings, emotions, sensations and sentiments. He wants to say that the suitable sociable circumstances must exist for the success of any revolution. To put it differently, he understands the miserable consequences of such revolution, but his heart cannot endure such disastrous deeds. Although he is a Marxist who supports the economic profits and the working class, he doesn't have the ability to bear this massacre. He is a human being from flesh and blood. Added to that, Hikmet in these lines defends his Marxist views. He assures that the Marxist does care about the human feelings and sensations. The Marxist is

not only interested in economic affairs and personal profits. The individual and life improvement are his main and prior aim. Thus, being a Marxist doesn't mean that he accepts the miserable and catastrophic results of the rebellion because he can't bear such situations. According to Hikmet, the Marxist means a human being who is full of humanity, sympathy and empathy, and this is the Marxist slogan in the lines above. Furthermore, he rejects all kinds of violence which insult the existence of the human being in the new republic.

The call for freedom brings to the mind one of the most important messages behind the poem. Ataturk doesn't allow any other party to participate in authority. He establishes the one-party state. In this respect Zurcher (1994) argues that "Turkey's government was an authoritarian one-party regime, and not to put too fine a point, a dictatorship" (Zurcher,1994:184). Under the control of such a government, it is certain that the freedom of thought and speech would become a dream never to be achieved. It is necessary for any country to have different and opposite currents of thought and opinions because they represent the most beautiful image of that country although people are different in their thoughts, opinions, colors, religion, cultures and politics; all these serve the country's cultural, political and economic life. In addition, they compete to produce the best things to the country and its inhabitants. But the case was different in Turkey since Ataturk restricted freedom of thought and prevented parties other than his. Bernard Lewis (1968) in his book *The Emergence of the New Turkey* clarifies that "Kemal was said to rule by means of a unique mixture of terror and social demagoguery, a special Turkish brand of national fascism or agrarian Bonapartism. Kemal was a fascist; under his rule Turkey was falling back into Imperialist domination and social restriction" (Lweis,1968:284).

Hikmet supports Ataturk's new orientation of the country towards the power of reason and knowledge. He adopts and follows this notion because it is the most important power in the universe. He is very enthusiastic to enroll in Kemal's program, participate and apply its models. Hikmet (2002) believes in its ideas and works on fulfilling them:

I will come out now and declare myself
Men of the land, we will conquer the land
And proving the power of knowledge
And the mystery of Oneness,

We'll abolish the laws of nations and religions (Hikmet,2002:49).
Ataturk's notion is to direct his country to technology and change its patterns of thought towards the power of reason. These orientations, according to Hikmet's perspective, are the essential needs of the new state,

and as Ilter Turan (1994) puts it “That is, to place a high value upon advanced material technology, use advanced techniques of organization and adopt a favorable attitude towards change” (Turan, 1994:33). However, this adoption of modern western technology is accompanied by a certain change in culture, one which helps to create a sense of rebellion, a state of awareness among the Turkish people like Hikmet. Certainly, it is a great achievement to engage your people in the power of technology and reason in order to invent new ideas for their nation, but this should also increase their awareness and sense of progress, and this in turn leads also to cultural change. In this sense Ilter Turan (1994) in his essay “Religion and Modern Culture in Turkey” clarifies that “Those subscribing to the Westernist mode argue that civilization was a unified whole and could not be broken into two components of technology and culture; therefore, change could not be limited to the adoption of modern technology but must also include cultural transformation if the Empire were to be saved from disintegration and destruction” (Turan, 1994:33-34). In other words, the lines in the poem: “And proving the power of knowledge/ and mystery of Oneness/” can be interpreted as the creation of the awareness of rebellion in the new Turkish society. This awareness should be spread and known by all the Turks about the nature, the real image, and the policy that Ataturk used in his modern state which Hikmet rejects and opposes. Turkey has a distorted image concerning freedom of speech and freedom of thought. This ugly and unfavorable image which was applied by Ataturk’s policy prohibited all kinds of freedom. Unimpeachably, for such new development and change in the new state, there would be certain chronological shifts, and it was obvious that Ataturk didn’t want to follow these shifts and their results which, from his own point of view, threaten his position as the founder and leader of the new Turkey. The only good images of that huge change were allowed to be expressed and the bad ones were prevented, so that Hikmet wanted to urge the people to rebel against this situation. Marian Aguiar (2007) in his article “Nazim Hikmet’s Modernism of Development” states that “From Hikmet’s perspective, Kemal’s modern state is a morally corrupt world” (Aguiar, 2007:111). Hikmet, the rebel whom he declares and defends throughout his poem, is the fact of what he is and his existence as a free Turkish communist Marxist poet without awe or any reservation. Hikmet wanted to encourage this sense of independency, autonomy and freedom and make Turks feel it in his country by seeing a clear vision in his society and characterization of his ideas and the ideas of many other Turkish intellectuals, poets and writers. So, he fights to represent his notions and to achieve them. In this sense Albert Camus (1978) points out that “The rebel, on the contrary, from his very first step, refuses to allow

anyone to touch what he is. He is fighting for the integrity of one part of his being. He does not try to, primarily, conquer, but simply to impose” (Camus, 1978:18).

Being free and experienced person, Hikmet’s wide knowledge enables him to see things more clearly than others. He isn’t satisfied with the situation in his country, for he doesn’t like its policy and the way it is implemented. Furthermore, he doesn’t want his country to go back to the old days of the Ottoman Empire, which from his own point of view, was unjust and totalitarian: he has his own special outlook for his country. In this context Aguiar (2007) points out that Hikmet “Clearly, while the communist poet did not see the Republic’s process of reform as granting emancipation for the entire society, he also did not wish to return to the undemocratic power of the monarchy” (Aguiar, 2007:112).

This awareness opens up the horizon to Hikmet to adopt revolutionary ideas and draw the attention of Turks to socialism and dealing with class consciousness. Hikmet believes that this class is the most important one, so that it is necessary to pay a lot of attention to its problems and sufferings. He thinks that this class is mistreated and exploited by the ruling class. In fact, Hikmet is considered a member of the Turkish avant-garde who focuses on the working class and its problems. In this context Goksu and Timms (1999) argue that “This new group of writers was concerned with the social question, writing about the problems of the working class, peasants, and people oppressed by the ruling class. Nazim was not only laying the foundation for a new kind of literature, but also trying to win people over the cause of Socialism” (Goksu and Timms, 1999:85). He sees that this class should be improved and developed and also should get all its rights because it is the backbone of the society which offers huge incomes:

There the softest, hardest
Most generous, thriftiest,
Most
Loving
Biggest, most beautiful woman
Earth
Was about
To give birth (Hikmet, 2002:57).

A Marxist and political commitment can be understood in the lines above both in form and content . A Marxist notion in the content and meaning of these lines which, from the researcher’s point of view, refers to the importance of land and its giving. One may also see an implied comparison between the land and the woman; the land is like the woman. As women are given a lot of attention, we should also do the same with the

land because it is one of the most important factors in forming a prosperous and outstanding society. The land is like the woman since she bears and delivers babies and helps in keeping and serving the humanity. The land also has the same big role in its production, from Hikmet's Marxist view, and in supporting and encouraging the Turkish society and economy. The importance of land and women in our life are crucial. This combination of economical and political views gives us a clear portrait concerning Hikmet's conception of his revolutionary ideas in content and form in his poem. Goksu and Timms (1999) state "For Nazim constructivism meant the combination of revolutionary themes with daring experiments in poetic form, especially the use of short lines and broken rhythms" (Goksu and Timms, 1999:82). In other words, short lines with broken rhythm give the reader the impression about the notion that the poet wants to create in order to reach his intention. Moreover, the poetic form of these lines gives us a clear image about Hikmet's political commitment and his revolutionary ideas in the form of short lines. He breaks the customs of the poetic form in order to focus on the political ideas he carries in these lines which urge the Turks to rebel against the system in Turkey. Also, in these lines the Marxist perspective concerning art in general as a means of change and liberation is quiet obvious. As Irena R. Makaryk(2000) states in the *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory* that art projects images of a better world and upholds deeply rooted human desires for freedom and happiness. In fact, Irena emphasized on the importance of developing a 'new sensibility' as a force of socio-political change and championed a cultural revolution in which art would transform life (Makaryk, 2000:98).

It seems that Hikmet proposes his epic to create a new sensibility. In other words, these lines from his epic can be interpreted from ecofeminism views. Hikmet creates a parallel image between woman and nature. He argues in these lines that women's maternal instinct is represented by nature with the ability to supply progeny with nutrients to mature. This matches the resources nature provides man to mature into consciousness. The male figure of the connection will be a new rebellious awareness, with men being combined with culture, equality and modernity. The symbiotic relationship would reinforce Hikmet's belief of the two being connected. Through his revolutionary and progressive ideas, Hikmet portrays nature as female, but in an enlightened notion not in reactionary and inferior one. He no more sees women as inferior as nature, and thus it might be exploited and mistreated by males. Instead, he offers a new unconventional modern notion which perceives women's intrinsic value. He uses nature in order to unite the Turks both males and females. He refers to nature as a female entity or a mother-like figure so as to assert its capability to create a

prosperous and fruitful life in Turkey. Hikmet's prolific imagination is insightful in this sense, since he plans to unite all the Turks and ignite their abilities in order to resist and defeat absolutism and oppression in the new enlightened Turkey.

It is necessary to note that the change within the Turkish society towards the western modern sample, and exactly the French model, turns it to be bourgeois. Instead of adopting and applying the modern technology and the western civilization, it changes to be that brutal, opportunistic and exploited model: the bourgeois. Alev Cinar (2005) in his *Modernity, Islam and Secularism in Turkey* clarifies that "As the basis of founding ideology of the new state, at that time modernity was understood as the adoption of what was seen as a universal norm of civilization, but was in fact a French bourgeois" (Cinar, 2005:5). This situation, in turn reveals the social class struggle which exists in the new Turkish society which transforms from feudal to bourgeois.

Hikmet sees and feels the threat that surrounds his society as a result of this blind imitation of the French bourgeoisie. He defends the rights of the working class in his writing. He also encourages other writers to write, reflect and deal with social changes in their society, in other words, to write about the people and reveals their problems, "Nazim insisted that contemporary writers should face the challenge of social change and place themselves at the service of people" (Goksu and Timms,1999:87).

Hikmet is a man who has a strong belief in his ideas, thoughts and ideologies and implements them not just in his literary production, but even in his life. He appears in a particular style which shows his support, care and interest in the working class; he lives and embodies their real life in order to cast the light on this class: "Nazim's solidarity with the working class was expressed not only in his writing, but also through a casual style of dress. He was fond of wearing a cloth-cap, his jacket casually slung over his shoulder, his shirt unbuttoned, his trousers ostentatiously crumpled" (Goksu and Timms,1999:94). This image gives us clear evidence about Nazim's commitment to his Marxist beliefs. He sacrifices himself and dedicates his art for his country's sake. He strongly believes in his revolutionary ideas concerning the economic situation and the working class in Turkey; he prepares his art to serve both of them, and as Albert Camus (1978) puts it, "Thus there is only one revolutionary form of art, which is, precisely, art dedicated to the service of the revolution" (Camus, 1978:254).

Hikmet is considered as one of the most influential and modernist writers in Turkey and internationally. His sense of modernity derives from his observation of the current and tragic mistakes which existed in his

society at that time, as he reveals them in his poem, “The Epic of Sheikh Bedridden”, and his fruitful plans and imaginative visions for a better future to Turkey. In this connection Cinar (2005) writes, “Modernizing forces are concerned not only with paving the way toward a better future, but also with finding fault in the present” (Cinar, 2005:25).

In fact, Hikmet pays the cost of being committed to his ideologies. He was accused of urging the soldiers to revolt against the authority. He was arrested many times and spent a long period of time in prison. The modernist, rebellious and revolutionary themes of the poem “The Epic of Sheikh Bedridden” caused him troubles and led him to prison, “Hikmet was charged with inciting the army to revolt, a sentence handed down after evidence was presented that a small group of soldiers were studying his 1936 historical poem “The Epic of Sheikh Bedridden”. He was freed only in 1950 after the new regime of Celal Bayer brought in an amnesty bill that reduced the sentence of long-term prisoners” (Aguar, 2007:108).

By embodying, reflecting and characterizing, modernist, rebellious and revolutionary ideas, Hikmet reveals the political unconsciousness of modernity concerning freedom and the situation in the new Turkey. But, in spite of all the dilemmas, miseries and difficulties Hikmet faced during his life in his country, he is an optimistic poet. His sense that something tremendous will happen in his country can be seen in Hikmet’s (2002) poem “Istanbul House of Detention,” he says:

I sometimes lost my freedom, bread, and you
But never my faith in the days that will come
Out of darkness, screams, and hunger,
Knocking on our door with hands full of sun (Hikmet, 2002:80).

In fact, he still has a strong belief in the Turks’ ability to change their new republic for a better future; a future which is full of freedom of speech and freedom of thought and many other different currents of thought. Added to that Hikmet’s poems help to create a revolutionary consciousness against repression in Turkey. In this sense, Hikmet wrote a very powerful poem while he was running away and hiding on a tree from the police because of his political commitment:

My leaves are a hundred thousand hands
I touch you, I touch Istanbul, with all hundred thousand
My leaves are my eyes, amazed
I watch you, I watch Istanbul, with a hundred thousand eyes
My leaves beat like a hundred thousand hearts
I’m a walnut tree in Gülhane Park
Neither are you aware of this, nor are the police
(Hikmet, “The Walnut Tree,” 2010: n.pag).

In the demonstration of 2013 which was called the Gezi Park protest, the protesters trilled these lines from Hikmet's poem as an anthem against the state oppression. The protesters cheered these lines from the poem in order to express their opposition and refusal to despotism and "ill-democracy". In other terms, they become as a slogan of unity and resistance against the repressive and regressive attitudes of the Turkish prime minister Erdogan, who condoned the use of unjustified violence by the police forces against the pacifist protesters (Mert,2016 : 2). So, Hikmet's poetry creates a new rebellious revolutionary awareness among the Turks. His didactic poems help to found a new democratic and free consciousness against tyranny and dictatorship.

Hikmet in his "Epic of Sheikh Bedridden" looks back to the past as a source of inspiration and evokes Sheikh Bedridden in order to urge the Turks to rebel against dictatorship. By evocation of this revolutionary figure, he articulates his rebellious and insightful ideas in the flesh are more real and concrete than abstract ideas. Hikmet directs his poetry to be a motivation for the Turks in order to besmirch totalitarianism and despotism. Throughout his didactic poem he urges his people for a better Turkey whose freedom of thought and expression and liberty are essential ideals. Hikmet's proposal for a more tolerant and open Turkey becomes undeniable truth after a long history of contestation through the power of the words.

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