

Memed, My Hawk (Ince Memed) in Relation to the Epic Tradition

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Abstract. *Memed, My Hawk*, a modern epic novel of the literary Turkish tradition published in 1955, could be classified as an example of World Literature (Weltliteratur) in the Goethean meaning of the term (Eckermann, J.P., *Gespräche mit Goethe in den letzten Jahren seines Lebens*, trans. John Oxenford as J.W. von Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann*, repr. North Point Press, 1994, p. 132). The many interwoven references and connections to other narrative modes, literary stereotypes, topoi and themes make this work an interesting object of critical analysis, proving that there is not only a national literature, which this novel of course belongs to, but also a more widespread literary context. I will identify, through the chapters and the pages of the novel, some of the literary commonplaces and intertextualities that can be referred to the Epic tradition of various epochs and national literatures.

1. Introduction

In the very first part of the novel, chapters 1-3, narrating Memed's childhood when he was only eleven, there is the intertextual literary topos of the "poor and abused child living in misery who escapes from misfortunes", a commonplace dating back to Picaresque literature of the earlier Siglo de Oro Spanish literary tradition¹ to the eighteenth century English² and nineteenth century

[1]The picaresque novel from the Spanish word "*picaresca*," from "*pícaro*," for "rogue" or "rascal", is a popular novel genre that depicts in realistic and sometimes humorous details, the disadvantages of a roguish and poor child of a very low social class like Memed is.

[2] Also in the first part of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the masterpiece of Spanish Picaresque novel, for example, the story is about the childhood of the main character, *Lazaro* who, as an abandoned child (nicknamed *Lazarillo*), lives in misery and is prey of different "masters" that reduce him in a state of slavery.

[3] In Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews or The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams*, the main character, like Kemal's *Memed*, at the age of ten is a shepherd, an animal tender. Even though Henry Fieldings defines this novel of his as 'written in imitation of the manner of Cervantes' it is of course *picaresque* for its lowest class main character.

[4] Also in the first part of *Lazarillo de Tormes*, the masterpiece of Spanish Picaresque novel, for example, the story is about the childhood of the main character, *Lazaro* who, as an abandoned child (nicknamed *Lazarillo*), lives in misery and is prey of different "masters" that reduce him in a

American³ novel until the later French Naturalism⁴ or Dickensian English psychological realism⁵. From Chapter 7 when he is eighteen, Memed evolves from a picaresque character, the “rogue” child, weak and frightened, to an “epic hero” at the turning point of Memed’s meeting with the brigand Big Ahmet and his subsequent elope with his beloved Hache. The character has been transformed from the picaresque “anti hero” to an epic “hero”. Here we find, in fact, the hero who fights against the evil from the classic epic tradition, oriental fables and Middle Age’s romances of the oral European tradition of minstrels and bards.

The main and most evident literary stereotype in the novel is, however, Memed’s leadership of the struggle against agrarian latifundism and the landlord of the feudal order.

This literary motive connects Kemal’s masterpiece to the novel tradition of South America and South Italy of the historical peasant struggles, full of epic and legendary characters .

In addition, there is the theme of blood vengeance, in Chapter 9 for the killing of Deuneh, Memed’s mother by Abdi Agha; in Chapter 13 for the familiar “*faida*”(struggle) in the subplot of the story of Iraz, Hache’s friend ; the destruction of the village Aktozlu in Chapter 15 and the final killing of Abdi by Memed in the last pages that have their roots in ancient Greek tragedy.

Last but not least, the “reconciliation” theme with the pending amnesty by the Ankara government (although refused by Memed) which links this Nobel candidate novel to other literary traditions such as the religious influences in the Italian novel of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries⁶

As we can see, *Memed, my hawk* has many keys of understanding and possible external connections but, in the following parts of this essay I will display and focus the main one: Memed as the Epic Hero of the historical peasant struggle against the latifundia and feudal system. I will investigate the possible intertextualities of this literary topos and theme with other novels and short stories of World Literature.

2. The Fight Against The Serfdom, Breaking The Feudal System

The people of Deymenoluk and the other villages of the Dikenli plateau, full of thistle fields and at the base of the Taurus mountains in south-eastern Turkey, are enslaved by their landlord or “Agha”, Abdi, and are tied to the land. They live in a mental state of complete psychological submission to their landlord to whom they must deliver a substantial percentage of their harvest. Ali Safa Bey, another landlord, has a similar intention to get ownership of many villages and transforms the villagers into tenant farmers. At the age of eleven, Memed decides to escape this type of slavery and continuous beating and violence. He runs away to a nearby village where he is sheltered by Suleyman. It seems that Suleyman isn’t subdued to Agha Abdi, although he lives in one of the five villages that he controls. The idea is implanted in Memed's head that it is possible to escape slavery and regain their own lands.

When Memed is eighteen, he elopes with Hache because otherwise she would be forced to

state of slavery.

[5] There is a broad literature about how Dickens inherited and developed the Picaresque myth in his novels.”*Oliver Twist and the Spanish picaresque novel*” by Sherman Eoff on “Studies in Philology” in one of the many published essays and research papers about the issue.

Many of the Dickensian characters, such as David Copperfield or Oliver Twist, are abandoned and abused children as the literary topos used by Kemal in the first part of *Memed, my Hawk(Ince Memed)*.

[6] With the word ‘Risorgimento’ historians have classified the Italian period starting from the end of Vienna Congress, in 1815, when Italy was subdivided in little states under the European powers jurisdiction, to 1870 when the independent Italian national state was proclaimed, after a long period of heroic warfare against the European colonial powers.

marry Abdi's nephew. Perhaps Memed and Hathe would find a place to live, but then Abdi follows them and Memed ends up wounding Abdi and killing the nephew. First, Memed joins Durdu's band of outlaws and thieves. Later in the book, we are told how the landlords use most of the brigand bands to terrorize villagers and force them to sell their land. Afterward, Memed forms his own brigand band with two companions, Sergeant Rejeap and Jabbar, and their aim is to make the villagers owners of their land and get rid of the Aghas. Only a few brigand leaders become legends by helping the poor. The confrontation between the two ways to run a brigand band is shown most clearly when Ali Saf Bey, the agha of Vayvay village, orders the brigand chief Kalayji to kill Memed. Memed ends up killing Kalayji and the villagers of Vayvay celebrate him as a hero, since they were victims of Kalayji, who was secretly paid by Ali Safa Bey. Memed is also a fighter and a breaker of the feudal system with its brutal laws and values. This medieval order was imposed by the aghas in this part of Turkey during the early Republican period after the Ottomans had been defeated.

In Chapter 15, after Durmush and his wife Aunt Huru revealed to Memed that his mother has been killed and Hathe is in jail on a false accusation by Abdi, he is ready to seek his revenge on him and all his family, as in the tribal system of an early feudal order. "Sergeant, take these two boys outside and do your job", said Memed to his companion inside Abdi's home at Değirmenoluk. Memed does not slaughter innocents in the end, giving up his plan and showing pity for killing the unfortunate children. He killed neither Abdi's children nor his two wives. Memed breaks from the tradition of feudal revenge against the entire family. Sgt. Rejep is angry that Memed did not let him kill everyone in the house. Sgt. Rejep, who is slowly dying because of a previous wound, also represents the old feudal tradition of blood revenge against an entire family (*Listen, we'll kill the whole family; we won't leave a single one alive*", pag. 204 Chapt.15). The villagers gather around, and Memed and his gang leave the area, later circling back to Uncle Durmish Ali's house before dawn.

3. The Epic Hero Of The Peasant Revolt

Memed is a modern epic hero because he fights for Justice and devotes all his life to this aim. He acts in defense of the weak and he responds with violence against the abuses, as Beowulf protects King Hrothgar and his people from Grendel. He is full of rage at the news of his mother's killing by Abdi as is Achilles when he learns about Patroclus' death by Hector's hand. But above all Memed is the leader of a peasant revolt or, better, the peasant-hero of which there are many examples in World Literature. The peasant struggle has roots dating back to Ancient Rome. Slavery has its origins in the deepest mists of antiquity. Before southern Europe came to be dominated by Rome, slaves usually rebelled only when a vast number congregated together, as at Chios in Greece, where slaves regularly escaped to the mountains and formed bandit groups that existed by occasional raids on isolated farms. The classical slave epic hero is the gladiator Spartacus of the Roman peasant revolts as they are described either in the Latin Claudiano "de bello Gothico"⁷ or the later 1873 novel

Spartaco as an hymn to the liberation and reunification of Italy by the Italian 'Risorgimento' (Resurgence)⁸ writer, Raffaello Giovagnoli⁹

In more recent times, a peasant-hero has been fighting against a determined economic and social order: the latifundia ruled by terrible feudal laws. Memed's revolt is a "post-colonial" struggle (after the first World War and the Ottoman defeat, Turkey was occupied by France) against what was left of a colonial power, now represented by Aghas who governed these

[7] The Italian national hero Giuseppe Garibaldi himself wrote the Preface to Giovagnoli's novel *Spartaco*. He defines himself, in *Spartaco*'s Preface, as a 'liberto' (a former Roman slave who earned his freedom) and, like *Memed*, wishes a world without neither masters nor slaves.

parts of the country with violence and terror.

Memed is comparable to “Kihika”, the courageous guerilla leader full of messianic spirit in *A Grain of Wheat* by Ngugi wa Thiong’O, set during the Mau-Mau revolt in Kenya¹⁰ who fights for national independence. All started as revolt against latifundism. Through a series of expropriations, the colony's government seized about 7,000,000 acres (28,000 km²; 11,000 sq mi) of land, some of it in the especially fertile hilly-regions, areas later known as the White Highlands which were owned exclusively by the European farmland who lived there.

But the political and economical situation of Turkey in *Memed* is more similar to the one described by the Italian writer Ignazio Silone in his *Fontamara*¹¹, 1930 novel, written when he was a refugee in Davos, Switzerland, from the Fascist Police. Fontamara is a fictional small rural village in Marsica in the Abruzzo region. The people (the *Fontamaresi*) are poor and the village is so remote that the citizens are unaware of world events such as the rise of Fascism. The *Fontamaresi* work the Earth to survive, turn to emigration as a means of economic improvement and are ignorant of events outside of their town. They are cut off from the rest of Italy and thus unaffected by modernity and new technology. The *Impresario* (Entrepreneur) character is a stark contrast to the *Fontamaresi*, who have laboured for centuries to little avail, as he quickly became the richest man in the region and embodies the power, authority and immorality of the Fascists. The *Fontamaresi* are exploited due to their naïvete and ignorance. The *Impresario* steals their water through a trick and he gradually reduces them in a state of slavery, robbing them of all their harvest by speculations on the prices of wheat. Berardo Viola, the “epic hero” of this novel, is initially only the spokesperson of these poor people and he is unable even to read and write: he makes the ultimate sacrifice to allow the continued distribution of clandestine texts to spread the word about socialism and encourage rebellion against Fascism.

4. The Struggle Against The Latifundia System As A Literary Topos

The peasant struggle for survival and justice is a universal literary topos in all the literatures of every epoch. It has generated many epic characters, real and fictional. In Giovanni Verga’s short story “Freedom”¹² (*Libertà*), the peasant struggle and bloody uprising for the lands from the Sicilian latifundia in Bronte, a little Sicilian town under the Etna Mount, mingles with the hopes of freedom and nationalism promised by Giuseppe Garibaldi, the national hero of the ‘Risorgimento’. Nino Bixio¹³, who repressed the revolt and Garibaldi are historical and real characters of this Verga’s short story.

But the latifundia system, that started in Roman times and has been predominant in parts of Europe into the 20th century, is still a reality in Latin America giving, life to a lot of epic characters ether in literature and in real life.

The story of the peasant heroes of Indios in Peru is narrated by Manuel Scorza in his pentalogy novel *The Ballad (La Balada)*¹⁴ where he narrates the never ending story of the Indios struggle to

[8] It was a military conflict that took place in Kenya between 1952 and 1960. It involved a Kikuyu-dominated anti-colonial group called *Mau Mau* and elements of the British Army auxiliaries and anti-Mau Mau Kikuyu.

[9] The anti-fascist spirit of *Fontamara* and its religious inferences is well analyzed in the Introduction to the first translation in English of this Italian novel edited by Judy Rawson, 1977

[10] According to Mark Chu, ‘Verga’s interpretation suggests that rather than a rationally conceived political revolt, the massacre was indicative of spontaneous and deep-felt resentment of the “prepotenze” (abuses of power) perpetrated over generations by the ruling class’ (195).

[11] He was an Italian soldier and politician, who fought for the Italian unification. He was also the captain of Giuseppe Garibaldi’s troop, landed in Sicily in the expedition of the “Thousands” to free Sicily from the Spanish Borbon power. The Sicilian peasants had hoped an immediate relief from the grievous conditions to which they were forced by the landowners.

[12] The literary work of the Peruvian writer Manuel Scorza is all focused on the political defense

recovering their usurped lands from the colonial latifundists. The 1962 collection of five serial novels is considered by the Indios to be the epic romance of their history. The characters of the novels are Indios heroes (real and fictional) some of whom have a magical gift such as invisibility, insomnia or the ability to be transformed in a puma. Here the South American “magical realism” gives an even more epic tone to the narration, more similar to the myths in the ancient Greek poems.

Memed has not magical powers like the Indios heroes of Scorza but they both live under the same conditions of suffering, injustice and deprivation. They are product of a latifundia system based on a feudal order. Memed is not a demi-god like the Classical heroes or the Indios heroes, but is the same mythological and magical character for the people of the Dikenli plateau. They protect and hide him from Abdi's hunt and his life becomes a legend for all of them. Memed is a myth and he doesn't want to give up this role: he refuses the amnesty because he wants to go on fighting for the rights of the weak and the poor peasants. "Memed had discarded his fez and now wore a blue silk kerchief. The nomad chief had sent him his pistol and its holster, both of which were embossed with gold." (Chapter 25, p. 318).

Like Memed, Pedro Terzo Garcia, the late peasant rebel of *The House of the Spirits*¹⁵ by Chilean writer Isabelle Allende, fights against the latifundia system of his country that is supported by the dictatorial regime sponsored by the USA. He is tortured, persecuted and forced to hide himself and live in clandestinity. The Chilean novel is also an extraordinary example of neomagical realism, with a mixture of unexplicable (the aunt's ghost) and realistic events (the historical setting of the Chilean latifundists and the peasant revolts).

The struggle against the latifundia system is a leit motive in Kemal's novel and Memed emerges, at some point, also as a supernatural hero, in connections to the magical realism of the Latin American novel of Scorza and Allende. In Chapter 31 Memed falls in an ambush by the Police and he is shot. But he miraculously survives, after a week of sufferings and agony thanks to the care of Hache and Iraz. In Chapter 32, it is autumn and there is a good harvest around Deyirmenoluk. Aunt Huru (Memed's partisan in his fight against Abdi), circulates in the surrounding villages and organizes the people to not give their yearly tribute in grain to Abdi. Since the Agha is afraid to return to his villages, people agree and tell the lie that the harvest failed. Lame Ali is Abdi's steward but is Memed's partisan as well, though covertly. Lame Ali repeats the lie of the people that the harvest failed and there is no grain to give as tribute. The people hide their grain, so when men from the District Governor are sent, they cannot find it. Memed no longer a solitary hero, or only a brigand but has become the leader of a peasant revolt against usurpation and abuse.

5. Conclusion

In the last Chapter 38, Jabbar tells Memed that there is an amnesty and he can come down from the mountains. Memed returns to Deyirmenoluk, but is called a coward by Aunt Huru, who fears that the dreaded landlord Abdi will now return. Big Osman, an old villager who comes to help Memed and calls him "my hawk.", deeply admires him as a national hero and gives him money. Osman urges Memed to settle on a plot of land in Vayvay village but instead Memed rides off. Lame Ali tells Memed where Abdi is staying in town, and how to get into the house. Memed rides

of the indigen and peasant communities' rights. In his collection of five serial novels, collectively known as 'La Balada' he mixed poetry, popular legends and history. He tells about the eternal struggle of the peasants to recover their lands, stolen by multinational mine companies and by latifundist 'fazenderos'

[13] Pedro Tercero is the young rebel who is willing to speak truth to power, even if it means risking his life. In his youth, he spreads socialist ideals to the workers on the 'hacienda', and later he becomes a revolutionary and a songwriter (his character may be modeled after revolutionary songwriter Victor Jara). After the coup d'état in Chile, he and his wife (the hacienda owner's daughter) exile themselves in Canada with Esteban's help.

alone into town to the house where Abdi stays, and goes in and shoots Abdi dead. He rides back home and tells Huru that Abdi is dead. Memed disappears, and the villagers are free. The disappearance from the scene and his refusal of the government amnesty and a comfortable life finally with his own land make him a perfect epic hero. He has all the qualities of a hero: strength, courage and honesty. But he is also a romantic hero, sensitive to feelings of piety toward Abdi's children and wives whom he spared from a vengeful death. He feels deep love toward Hache and his widowed mother Dunueh. Twice he put his life at risk coming back to the village, moved by the love for these two women. The first time when he is only a child, he returns home from his long flight and comfortable stay at Suleyman's home, only to help his poor and abandoned mother in the harvest; the second, he organizes the liberation of Hache and Iraz from their unjust detention in prison.

In Chapter 17 there is the turning point of his passage from a simple fugitive in search of vengeance to an epic hero. Memed escapes from the police along with Jabbar and believes that Abdi perished in the flaming village of Atozlu. He has acted, till now, only to escape from Abdi's brutality and revenge his mother and girlfriend. So he is simply moved by personal reasons. However, the flames, that he is watching from afar, are a force of both destructive and positive change by getting rid of the feudal order. Now Memed tells Jabbar of his plan to free the tenant farmers of Abdi's five villages and burn the thistle fields. The thistle fields are also part of the oppression of the farmers, but from uncontrolled and unimproved nature. He is a "human" hero, unique but different from the Classical epic heroes of Western Europe or the modern ones of Scorza and Allende's novels who save themselves thanks to external intervention (magical power in Scorza's; the Pedro's powerful father in law in Allende's). Memed is not born hero but as a common man. He is forced to become a hero by the situation and the events of his life. He can count only on his personal strength, bravery and feelings, since the time of his childhood when he courageously escaped from such brutalities and psychologically rebelled against the agha. He gradually becomes an "epic hero" in the fantasy of the people who spread his legend across the plateau of thistles and beyond. He realized that has become the only hope of a better future for his people and he changes from a common man who only wished only to live in peace with his loved Hache on his own land at the end of the story, and accepts the role of "epic hero" that the people (especially Aunt Haru) give him: he refuses the amnesty and continues to live as a fugitive. Now that all his loved ones are dead and his dreams of a better life have collapsed, he finds a reward in this legendary leadership that the people of the Dikenli plateau have bestowed upon him and will live in their mind and thoughts forever. This is an "Epic Hero".

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