

THE EXISTENTIAL DEPICTION OF NATURE VERSUS IN KEMAL'S MY HAWK

Yaşar Kemal'in İnce Memed Eserinde Doğa Karşı Kültürün Varoluşsal Tasviri

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi. Serap SARIBAŞ

Karamanoğlu Mehmetbey Üniversitesi, İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü, Karaman/TÜRKİYE

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4079-8024>

ABSTRACT

Yashar Kemal's Memed My Hawk, considered an epic narrative, refers to an exceptional epic value within its existential depiction of Nature versus Culture. In the prologue of Memed My Hawk, Kemal presents the narrative of Memed as an epic; however, he points out that the character's individual developments must not get "elevated to the skies". That is to say, he asserts that an individual is a creation of the peculiar circumstances in his or her life. Through employing such a view, Kemal depicts a theme of 'revolt and commitment' in his epic within a divergent ethos, in contrast to the classic epics similar to those of Homer and Virgil. Indeed, it can be claimed that the concept of 'Nature versus Culture' seems to be palpable in the epic genre as it conventionally depicts confrontation or contrast of an individual hero with the society in which he lives or to which he may strike. This portraiture is evident in Memed My Hawk as well, yet the portrayal seems to be disparate from the classic models through the value system presented. The heroes in the classic models need to be from such an elite root that Homer calls them 'shepherd(s) of people', while Kemal's hero is from among the common people. More precisely, Kemal's hero is a young orphan peasant whose epic essence is shaped through a legendary transformation from a young rebel into a heroic character who challenges the elite echelons. Indeed, what gives him glory is not the bravery with which he fights in war, but rather his sense of commitment to his social class.

Key Words: Epic Narrative, Nature versus Culture, Homeric and Virgilian Heroism, Classical Mythology

ÖZET

Yaşar Kemal'in destansı bir öykü olarak kabul edilen İnce Memed'i, Doğa karşı Kültürün varoluşsal tasviri içinde istisnai bir destansı değere değer. İnce Memed'in önsözünde Kemal, Memed'in öyküsünü destansı bir öykü olarak sunar ancak, karakterin bireysel gelişiminin "göklere çıkartılmaması" gerektiğine dikkat çeker. Diğer bir deyişle, bir bireyi yaratan şeyin kendi hayatındaki kendine özgü koşullar olduğunu iddia eder. Homeros ve Vergilius'inkilere benzer klasik destanların aksine Kemal, böyle bir bakış açısıyla farklı bir inanç ortamında 'isyan ve bağlılık' temasını tasvir eder. Aslında 'Doğa karşı Kültür' kavramının epik türde aşikâr görüldüğü iddia edilebilir, çünkü geleneksel olarak kahraman bireyin içinde yaşadığı ya da saldırdığı toplumla yüzleşmesini veya o topluma olan karşıtlığını anlatır. Bu tasvir, İnce Memed'de de belirgindir ancak sunulan değer sistemi aracılığıyla klasik modellerden farklı görünmektedir. Klasik modellerdeki kahramanlar Homeros'un 'halkın çobanları' olarak ifade ettiği asil ailelerden gelmelidir, Kemal'in kahramanının ailesi ise sıradan insanlardır. Daha iyi anlatmak gerekirse, Kemal'in kahramanı içindeki destansı gücün, genç bir asiden elit tabakaya meydan okuyan bir kahramana efsanevi dönüşümüyle şekillenen yetim, genç bir köylüdür. Aslında, savaşta gösterdiği cesaret değil, toplumsal sınıfına bağlılık duygusu ona zaferi getirmiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Destansı Öykü, Doğa karşı Kültür, Homeros ve Vergilius Kahramanlığı, Klasik Mitoloji

1. INTRODUCTION: The Heroic Identity in Memed My Hawk

In an effort to debate the depicted epic value in *Memed My Hawk*, it seems indispensable to mark the epic elements in the narrative and subsequently explore the heroic identity presented in the narration. In the preface of this work, Kemal contends that: "Every age has its own way of mythmaking" (*Memed My Hawk*, xii); and indeed, this seems to be the way with his unconventional epic, as he asserts that an individual's evolution must not get elevated to heavenly mythical elements, whereas such an elevation is a necessary characteristic in the epics of Homer and Virgil. In fact, in the traditional epic, the glory that is gained or lost by the hero is at the whim of the gods and the goddesses. However, in *Memed My Hawk*, Kemal has created a narrative in which there is a hero who is in essence a poor farmer and only as a result of the incidents in his life does he change his way of living, leading him to earn glory and importance despite the fact that he is not in search of these. Conversely, this hero earns local glory and importance – not due to his nation (as in Homeric or Virgilian heroism), nor the whole human race (as in Milton's epic), but thanks

rather to the changes made by villagers. Here, the hero is not born by a nymph or is not as powerful as Achilles, Hector, Odysseus, or Aeneas; he is more of a conceivable character. Alternatively stated, the reader encounters a heroic identity that is compatible with the social and economic conditions of the hero's contemporary era. Additionally, although the action and setting do not involve the supernatural, they contain a young valiant man who dramatically challenges a local tyrant in a striking way. This young hero's quest comes in the form of his revolt against a cruel landowner and it is through this, as Kemal presents, Memed "explores the depths of the theme of committed revolt against the injustice within the society that he lives" (*M.M.H.*, x). Thus, it can be claimed that this is the narrative of a hero who stands in opposition to the social rules and norms in which he is living. Memed's life, his individuality, and consequently the society he is part of are altered by this theme of 'culture versus nature,' which emerges as 'society versus the individual' in Memed's life. It is also through such a theme that the reader becomes inspired to see Memed as a hero comparable to the classic heroes in some respects.

2. MEMED MY HAWK, VERSUS THE CLASSIC EPICS

Homer, in the epic of the *Odyssey* notes 'Zeus is, who gives what he wants to every man on earth' (*Odyssey*, 30). Also, in the *Iliad* he remarks that 'the gods on high- they hold the ropes of victory in their hands' (*Iliad*, 217). Conversely, Virgil depicts Aeneas as a leader who is predestined by the gods to establish the Latin race and the walls of Rome: "... an exile driven on by fate, he was the first to flee the coast of Troy, destined to reach Lavinian shores and Italian soil, yet many blows he took on land and sea from the gods above" (*Aeneid*, 47).

Considering the statements above, it seems that 'fate' as a basic principle, which is prescribed by the gods and the goddesses, imposes its power on the lives of the classic Roman and Greek heroes. However, in Memed's era, the principal of fate has a different color and essence. Although there are no Olympian gods in *Memed My Hawk*, the presence of fate in shaping Memed's life can be felt implicitly. His fate and his free will, as two contradicting concepts, can be simultaneously seen to shape Memed's heroic identity, like the simultaneous presence of these opposing forces in the world portrayed by 'Chaos theorists' who define the World as a 'chaotic system'. Stuart Sim asserts that "in chaotic systems randomness and determinism are simultaneously present which leads to the counter-intuitive conclusion that they are simultaneously and unpredictable in their operation" (*Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*, 91). In *Memed My Hawk*, the heroism of Memed is not prescribed by the Olympians, yet his lost childhood and the events which lead him to Durdu's brigand group seem to be imposed by fate. Kemal's epic starts when the hero is a young child leaving his mother and village behind to escape the torments of Abdi Agha, in search of a place where he can find freedom and protection. This journey portrays a realistic kind of sorrowful childhood for Memed by which Kemal seems to stimulate the reader's sympathy for the miserable fate of the child. "I will go and tell him.... I will say to him I've come to you to be a goatherd and I'll plow your land and sow your crops. I'll say to him that my name is Kara Mistik, Black Mistik. I will say I have no father no mother, no Abdi Agha..... Let my mother weep. Let that infidel Abdi Agha search for me. I will be their child" (*M.M.H.*, 8). Thus, in Kemal's epic, as depiction of a destiny imposed by gods and goddesses would not be well-suited, fate speaks its own voice by depicting a boy who is born as a typical poor peasant, one who has not only lost his father, but also his mother, and whose society is subject to extreme poverty and cruelty. In his run from such misery, fate introduces Memed to Uncle Suleyman, who later, after Memed shoots Abdi Agha and his nephew and escapes again, takes the runaway to the mountains to introduce him to Durdu's brigand band. Here again, Uncle Suleyman's effect on Memed and the formation of his heroic identity is noteworthy as he advises him: "Listen to me son', he said. 'If you ever kill an innocent man or one who has never done much harm, or if you kill for money, you won't escape me'.... 'But if you ever meet another Abdi Agha and don't kill him, you won't escape from my hands either. If you meet a hundred Abdi Aghas, kill all of them . . . 'it's a promise' said Memed" (*M.M.H.* 103). This may also be reminiscent to the reader of the once famous *Robin Hood*-like brigand known as Big Ahmet. Kemal introduces Big Ahmet when Memed and his friend, on their way to city, see an old lonely man who seems to personify such a brigand talking about his features; "He never held any travelers up and, in his district, no other brigand dared show his face....in the regions he roamed he used to take medicines to the sick, oxen to those who lacked them, and flour to the poor" (*M.M.H.*, 57). On the other hand, while Memed is standing in opposition to his society, he needs to make a clear decision about the value system he should choose. Thus, it can be stated that although fate seems to be steering his life, Memed's own decisions and choices shape his identity as a hero. Through his revolt, Memed portrays his presence as an individual who is opposed to

the imposed social norms, and it is by choosing commitment to his society that Memed distinguishes himself from Durdu and his brigands who kill, and shoot their victims in the leg and arm, and even strip their underwear garments to attain a fearsome name. Memed notes: "One should never humiliate people. They are sensitive about certain things, and you should never hurt them there. I know that from my own experience under Abdi Agha. You should respect this in people and never despise them" (*M.M.H*, 135). Looking through the lens of a 'Chaos Theorist', different attractors might have affected such a choice by Memed. Sim asserts: "Behind systems lie mysterious entities known as strange attractors, which dictate what happens within each system. Strange attractors are 'the trajectory toward which all other trajectories converge', and they are inexorable in their operation (Gleick, 1988, 150). We experience their effect in such ordinary natural phenomena as the weather, which is assumed to have its own strange attractor shaping its behavior" (*Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century* 92). Here these attractors can be the torments he suffered from Abdi Agha, the story of Big Ahmed, the affection and advice received from Uncle Suleyman, his love for Hache, his sympathy for the villagers, and the cruelties inflicted by characters like Abdi Agha or Durdu. These incidents and points in Memed's life seem to play a vital role in shaping him as a hero, as if without these he could have had a different essence; yet it is important to note that while the miserable conditions might be relatively common among all the poor villagers, there is only one Memed, who gains a heroic identity to be called 'Memed, My Hawk'. Therefore, it can be claimed that while fate dominates the preceding classic epics mentioned above, Kemal's epic is a world where determinism and free choice are present at the same time.

Correspondingly, it is important to note that as in the classic epic style belonging to Homer and Virgil, pain and agony seem to act a quintessential role in creating the heroic identity of Memed; as if the more a hero suffers, the more glory he merits and becomes more outstanding. In fact, this seems to be one of the basic features of the heroic identities in Homer and Virgil as well. The predestined sufferings of heroes like Odysseus or Aeneas have been narrated in such a way that this theme of pain and agony can be regarded as one of the touchstones for measuring the greatness and nobleness of heroes. Memed's predestined anguish starts from his childhood, from the time he becomes an orphan. But as he grows up, he becomes more aware of his torments: the pain endured by the persecution suffered at the hands of Abdi Agha, his lost childhood, the anguish of witnessing the misery of his mother and the other villagers, and the distress of losing Hache. These events all result in shaping Memed's quest for revenge. In fact, it might be noted that what inspires Memed to challenge the system is not self-assertion or ambition, but rather what initiates his insurrection can be compared to the Greek concept of 'nemesis' or retribution and revenge, which seem very tangible in Homeric epics as well. For instance, in the *Odyssey*, Telemachus is encouraged and at the same time expected to follow the path of Agamemnon's son to gain glory for himself. Nestor, the wise man asserts:

"How good it is for a son to be left
When a man dies! Agamemnon's son
Avenged his death, killing his murderer
The treacherous Aegisthus. You too, my friend-
For I see that you are handsome and tall-
Should be brave and strong, and win a name for yourself" (*Odyssey*, 34).

In Adriana Room's words, Nemesis was the goddess daughter of Nyx who was, and still popularly is, the personification of retribution for evil (*Who Is Who In Classical Mythology*, 212). In Kemal's text, separating Hache from Memed seems to be unfair to the same extent that it was unjust to take Helen away from her husband in the *Iliad*; in other words, if Homer depicts the Trojan War as justifiable because of Helen, then the reader of Kemal's text, as well, would not blame Memed for shooting Abdi Agha and his nephew. In fact, Kemal has created the spirit of 'Nemesis' in such a way that the reader expects the narrative to punish the tyrant of the story. If Abdi Agha deserved punishment for all his cruelties, then so does Durdu. Kemal introduces Durdu, who becomes the subject of the principal retribution of the text, when fate leads Memed to the mountains and he becomes a member of Durdu's brigand group thanks to Uncle Suleyman. Durdu is portrayed as a character who is in search of fame at any cost. He is the brigand who robs not only the rich but also the poor, shoots the right arm and leg of his victims, makes his victims take off all their clothes including their underwear, or makes the women dance just to construct a name

create a name and reputation for himself. This extreme pride and arrogance evoke the Greek classic concept of 'Ate'. In Adriana Room's words, Ate' personifies 'blind folly' (*Who Is Who In Classical Mythology*, 68). One of the critical moments in shaping the heroic identity of Memed is when he separates from Durdu and his band, threatening him not to humiliate their host, Kerimoghlu. It can be claimed that in this situation Kemal creates a condition similar to that of the dispute which took place between Achilles and Agamemnon in the *Iliad*. What seems to be the common point is that both Agamemnon and Durdu are debasing not only their sacks but also the whole ideology of their job by not considering any value systems, and this greed causes both Achilles and Memed to go their separate ways.

3. AN EXISTENTIAL LOOK OVERVIEW

David Castriota asserts that "Mythic tradition exemplified the causes of human excellence and achievement, as well as weakness and failure, for they addressed the issue of ethos, human character or behavior and the consequences, good and bad that human action would incur (3, *Myth, Ethos and Actuality: Official Art in Fifth Century B.C Athens*). Considering Castriota's statement it can be claimed that the mythic tradition seems to have created an area for humanity to investigate the exercise of power of choice by its depiction and personification of the concept of 'ethos' since the classic heroes have found themselves opposing their social settings or rules. The guiding value system of ethos might signify the efforts made by the classics to define standards and meanings for their existence and this may remind us of the concept of existentialism, whose main argument is that "existence precedes essence" and holds that man fashions his own existence and only exists by so doing, and, in that process, and by the choice of what he does or does not do, gives essence to that existence" (J.A. Cuddon, 294). Considering Kemal's epic, it might be asserted that in its existential depiction of 'nature versus culture', *Memed My Hawk* suggests a different outstanding epic value. As discussed earlier, the division which takes place between nature (the individuality) of the hero, and his culture (his surrounding conditions) becomes the first significant point in creating Memed's heroic identity. Actually, Memed is not born of a brigand family, yet what shapes his decision to become a legendary brigand is by the circumstances imposed on him by the society in which he lives. The identity he shapes is different from that of the heroes in the texts of Homer or Virgil since he is not in search of self-assertion and glory. The glory he gains is not the reward given by the Olympians or fate, but merely seems to be the fruit of the conditions he bears and the ethics he chooses. Actually, what seems noteworthy here is his character's development from a poor child to a legendary character framed by his experiences and sufferings. Gaining such maturity throughout course of the narrative is also reminiscent of character development in the genre of Bildungsroman. In defining this literary class, Cuddon asserts that "it refers to a novel which is an account of the youthful development of a hero or heroine (usually the former). It describes the processes by which maturity is achieved through the various ups and downs of life" (82). Kemal depicts five critical moments in Memed's heroic life that led to his development. The first takes place when he leaves his village to find a better place to live. This is followed by the second which takes place years later when he decides to marry Hache and escape the village with her. The third critical moment is when Memed becomes a brigand and the fourth is when he goes his separate way from Durdu. The fifth and final critical moment, and the most mature point in shaping his heroic identity, is when Memed decides to challenge the power system by choosing not to settle down in the village even after amnesty is announced. This last phase fulfils the perfection of Memed's heroic identity as he has found his 'authentic self'. If this fulfillment were to be probed by a 'Chaos' theorist, it can be claimed that 'the edge of the chaos' to which Memed was exposed happens by the existential 'gaze' of Hürü. Sim claims that "The edge of chaos is where systems are at their most creative as well as most unpredictable" (*Introducing Criticism at the 21st Century*, 93). Kemal depicts such a moment in his hero's life in this way:

"They told Hürü that Memed had come into the village. She hurried to meet him in the square and seized him by the collar. 'Memed!' she shouted at the top of her voice. 'You let them get Hache, and now you're going down to surrender to them? Abdi will come back and settle in the village again like a pasha. Are you going to give yourself up? Coward! This year for once Dikenli plateau has not gone hungry..... 'Woman-hearted Memed! See all those villagers staring at you'" (*M.M.H*, 367).

It is Memed's actions as a responsible conscious being that transform him from a peasant to a brigand and from a brigand to a hero about whom 'news was never heard again' (*M.M.H*, 370). In other words, Kemal's hero defines his actual life as a hero by what constitutes the circumstances around him instead of possessing an arbitrarily attributed noble or heavenly essence as seen in Homer or Virgil.



4. CONCLUSION

Memed My Hawk portrays a narrative about the birth of a hero in which the formation of the protagonist's heroic identity seems to be the most noteworthy concern. At this point, Yashar Kemal seems to be a fatherly writer who adopts Memed as a young poor child and brings him up to such maturity and ripeness that he merits being called an epic hero. While the story of Memed can be examined by the classic epic principles to some extent, it presents an innovative epic style in which the hero does not appear as a heavenly figure who is a hero by essence. In contrary to what was depicted by Homer and Virgil, here the hero earns the heroic identity while maturing through the text by experiencing the circumstances presented in the social context of the narrative. Also, considering the heroic identity, it is notable that Memed does not belong to the elite social class of his society as did the classic predecessors who were known as 'shepherds of their people'. Memed is from a common poor class who revolts against the elites. His revolt is significant because this is the mechanism by which he abandons the society which devalues his individuality and his ethical commitment to his social class. He is given a heroic identity because he does not shoot at the police sergeant who wants to arrest him because he is a 'family man' (*M.M.H*, 136) or doesn't harm the family of Abdi Agha (*M.M.H*, 206) since he doesn't want to debase his revenge. So, as a result, while conveying standards of an epic narrative, Yashar Kemal's *Memed My Hawk* presents a diverse epic value within its existential depiction of the theme of 'Nature versus Culture'. By such a definition, Kemal depicts a theme of 'revolt and commitment' in the epic within a different ethos, compared with classical epics like those of Homer and Virgil. This can be an attestation for Kemal's statement in the introduction to his epic *Memed My Hawk* where he notes that 'every age has its own myth making'.

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