

Political Capacities of Literature in the Early Modern Turkey

The Case of Resimli Ay

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Ottoman literary tradition, to a great extent, is composed of poetry of which style and form was a version of Persian-Arabic poetry. This tradition has its own economy of production and consumption which was formed mainly under patronage of the Ottoman Court and bureaucracy. The Ottoman poet was faithful and devoted to his patron in particular and the Sultan in general. This traditional system was challenged and overthrown by the influence of modern realist literature imported from Europe during the 19th century, and then the social role of the man of letters and his relation to social and political matters totally changed. Then, he was not only man of aesthetics but also one of political intervention.

The Kemalist reforms of modernization which Turkey had bore witness to in 1920's created a milieu of harsh transformation not only in political and social spheres but also in artistic one. Terms and conditions of artistic production were in the hands of a regime which incrementally acquired authoritarian qualities. Increasing social and political control of the early Republic informed the artistic production to a great extent. Yet, literary and other kinds of artistic products created an alternative sphere of resistance.

Resimli Ay magazine, which was published between 1924 and 1931, exposed unusual literary products in this milieu and in this way not only had a special place in literary history of the Republic but also created an original form of political resistance. It is interesting to know that the magazine was once a popular-American style magazine. On the one hand, it generally published articles on woman beauty, healthcare, childcare, news from Hollywood, and so forth. On the other hand, it had a welfare discourse and published articles on social

problems of especially women and children. After 1929, however, the course of the magazine was radically changed and instead of a popular public magazine emerged a radically leftist political and literary one.

The change is very much a consequence of Nazım Hikmet's participation in the magazine. He was a young poet, who had his higher education in Russia in the early 1920's and was highly influenced by the artistic atmosphere of the early years of the Russian Revolution. He authored futuristic-constructivist poems under the influence of famous Russian poet Vladimir Mayakovsky and believed that the poetry of modern days should have been revolutionized in terms of its stylistic and formal qualities. Thus, Nâzım Hikmet was the first avant-garde poet of Turkey.

In this way, Nâzım Hikmet and his young friends published poems of radically different form and style in *Resimli Ay*. First of all they used some formal and stylistic instruments and strategies which had not been used in Turkish literature so far: bigger and smaller fonts, bold and italic letters, broken lines, words chosen for their phonetics to create urban rhythms, and so forth. Moreover, in their poems the general tendency is brand new: encapsulation of images of modern city like crowds, machines, factories etc. As a third quality, they totally rejected the inheritance of the art of past. They repudiated to think life and art as two different spheres, and instead called for a new art that would annul this split.

Yet, the literary agenda of *Resimli Ay* was not composed of only Futuristic qualities. The socialist point of view created a tension with avant-garde stance. For in the very same years the magazine changed its way, Futurism and other avant-garde currents began to lose their support, designated as bourgeois, and socialist realism became the official contention of the Party in the Soviet Russia. Nâzım Hikmet and friends, as young communists, were radically against "bourgeois arts" and simultaneously under the influence of realist and socially sensitive tendencies. As a consequence of this tendency their radical attitude against

traditional poetry would not be valid in prose. Thus, they not only advocated revolutionary form and style in poetry, but also favored a realist literature of which the most important quality is housing and carrying the knowledge of social reality.

Then the magazine's pages attributed to literature were highly eclectic: In the area of poetry the magazine's vision was avant-garde and iconoclastic, whereas in the area of prose it claimed a very classical realism. Although in the magazine Nâzım Hikmet and his friends couldn't explain and legitimize this eclectic structure, it created a very interesting opportunity for double-sided resistance.

The first of these is the resistance against the incrementally harshening authority of the Republican elite. It is interesting to see that magazine's poetic vision somehow met with the Republic's radical rejection of Ottoman past. They both called for a new man and a new life. Indeed, in the next years Kemalist government would not have a harsh attitude against avant-garde attempts if they hadn't politically criticizing content. However, in the realist prose published in the journal a more obvious and direct criticism was consciously established. The realist exposition of lower classes of the country was deeply disturbing for the Republican elite, especially because of its capacity to deconstruct the Republican discourse. The motto of this discourse was declared by the ideologue of the Republic, Ziya Gökalp: "We are a mixed society without classes and prerogatives".

This realist vision had a course hand in hand with direct political criticism of the articles that mounted rapidly in the last two year of the magazine. The oppressed people who looked like the protagonists in short stories became the subject of the magazine, and in the meantime these oppressed people became the typical topic of the short stories. The news from Hollywood stars, articles on healthcare or relations between men and women ceased to an end. Instead of that stuff, articles on, interviews with and photos of peasants and workers became one of the two main parts of the magazine (the other one is the part of literary stuff).

The end of the process was really surprising: the owners and staff of the magazine called for a party of workers and peasants, and the owner of the magazine joined to municipality elections declaring a socialist program. Then, *Resimli Ay* was forced to be closed.

The second way of the resistance was in the socialist politics itself. Nâzım Hikmet was one of the members of The Turkish Communist Party which was an underground organization directly connected to the Soviet Russia. However, he was dismissed from the Party in 1930. The reason was his attempt to constitute an alternative communist party. Historical documents do not reveal why Nâzım Hikmet chose to do that, but his literary point of view might disclose its reasons. As seen above, *Resimli Ay* embraced futuristic form and style, and developed a revolutionary poetic vision. In the same years that was not acceptable for the Party in Russia, and even thought as one of the signs of being Trotskyite. Nâzım Hikmet was not oblivious of the avant-garde schools' condemnation of being Trotskyite or bourgeois, but never quitted his poetic vision. In this way, he probably tried to resist the change in Soviet Russia and disclosed his different, even Trotskyite point of view.