

A Novel About Dersim: The Tragic Leaf in Turkey's Recent History

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It is so torturous to reflect the tragedy that was experienced in the first years of Turkish Republic (specifically in 1937-1938) in Dersim, in art and especially in novels. Likewise, both the bitterness and the social trauma that the event created make it difficult to express it in artistic form. The novel of Oya Baydar, named *O Muhteşem Hayatınız* (2012), both grasps the reality of the period more objectively and humanely, and comes up to literary level as it is not an engaged text in spite of the outside point of view. The purpose of this paper is to take attention on this point of the different approach created by Oya Baydar regarding with Dersim tragedy. Therefore, the style of deductive method is adopted, the reflection of Dersim tragedy on the art of novel is evaluated and the novel of Baydar, named *O Muhteşem Hayatınız*, is analyzed. All in all, we come to a conclusion by feeling that Oya Baydar, with her modern novel, comprehended Dersim tragedy from more humanistic and universal viewpoint, and produced a work of art that also accomplish the certain level of literary sense in her novel.

Keywords: Dersim tragedy, Oya Baydar, novel, *O Muhteşem Hayatınız* (*That Glorious Life of You*)

Introduction

Art is always an important source for the pains, wars, tragedies, exiles, etc., through the histories of societies. Throughout history, artists produce art with an aim to make the whole painful process become apparent in all its parts, to leave impression upon the conscience of society, to make those processes unforgettable, and to enable the sufferers be understood. However, the transmission of these events, in other words, writing them out in artistic form, which is both responsibility and a unique source for the art, is always torturous. Both the bitterness and the social trauma that the event created make it difficult to express it in artistic form. Certainly, the fact that the political, social, cultural, and common atmosphere has not grown in maturity to discuss the topic in all aspects and clearly; the distant approach shown to the experiences by the rulership; and also that the printed and visual media have not raised a question restrain the great social events to be written in artistic form thoroughly (Demir, 2012). In all these negative conditions, however, those who try to produce a work of art either evaluate the events with outside and reductive point of view being engaged to the official discourse or deviate from the artistic discourse being engrossed in the tragedy of the events. Reflecting the experiences which are so old as to take us back to the 16th of Ottoman Empire in general, but in particular in the early period of Turkish Republic, even more specifically in 1937-1938 in Dersim to the art, especially in novel is torturous.

In this general perspective, most of the novels that pursue a goal to tell the tragedy of Dersim handle this

painful process with a reductive point of view and legalize the official discourse whether on purpose or not, providing a protection of dominant common memory. Apart from the texts that look the official ideology's perspective purposely, some texts that claim to handle the experiences in Dersim with a realistic point of view can be said to have great deficiencies as well. This understanding, which neglects the historical, cultural, denominational, ethnic, social, and geographical aspect of Dersim tragedy, sometimes reflects the events in Dersim as an abstract conflict between the landlord and peasant and sometimes as an attempt to elucidate, and to save a society from ignorance. These narrative texts that are produced by this understanding not only provide the construction of the dominant social memory but also are compatible with the approach of the highbrow, intellectual environment of the period to the issue. For instance, Bilbaşar's novel, *Cemo* (1982), is one of the most important narratives of that kind. In *Cemo*, which is met with deep interest by the literature and art environment for the reason of that it won the 1967 Türk Dil Kurumu (Turkish Language Institution) Novel Award and the dramatization of Bilbaşar who looks from the stand point of the official ideology both at the Sheikh Said event and at the Dersim tragedy contributes to the construction of the dominant social memory on this matter purposely. Thus, Bilbaşar (1982) did not hesitate to juxtapose the official ideology, namely Kemalism, which he believed to be on the side of progressivist and poor with Sheikh Said Rebellion since he evaluated the event as a "retrogressive alliance of lord and sheikh" (p. 181). As he thought that he could not create a contrast about the events in Dersim due to Alevi-Redhead (Qizilbash) identity of Dersim, he appealed to anachronism (Bilbaşar, 1982) and showed the tragedy of Dersim as it took place during the Ottoman period.

There are also some works that look at the Dersim tragedy out of the dominant discourse and evaluate the events through this perspective. The most of these works are rigid political narratives. In novels, which are written by those who mostly were born during the Dersim tragedy period and belong to first generation, there did not pay much attention to the elements such as construct, narrator, place, time, language, and expression which are the basic elements of novel. These texts which depend on conveyance of the authors' political ideas about the events in Dersim in an agitative language, do not carry any value in a literary sense and remain superficial like the narratives that reflect the 1937-1938 period in Dersim through the official discourse's point of view. For example, Işık's novel, named *Dersimli Memik Ağa* (1990), is one of the typical narratives of that style. Haydar Işık, who is in a flap about expressing his ideas concerning Dersim tragedy in a political-agitative language, hardly pays attention to the elements' of a novel (Işık, 1990). It is very hard not only to evaluate this narrative in which the whole elements—from construct to the characters, from time to place, and from language to expression—of novel are studied scratchily as a text, but also to handle as a novel. On the other hand, socialist realist novels which are indited by authors who are mostly left-leaning and look at Dersim tragedy from a different aspect miss the background of the events as they put the motifs of "resistance-revolt" on the focal point of the narrative. One of the most important exemplary narrative of these kind is Oruçoğlu's novel named *Dersim* (1997). Oruçoğlu, who handled a torminous and hard topic like Dersim tragedy in a socialist realistic style, wanted to provide a balance by articulating a story full of love and sexuality to this atmosphere (Oruçoğlu, 1997). Oruçoğlu, who is successful in weaving the historical people, the dialogues among people, and events into the novel, has difficulty in building the fictional people and events, the fact that the characters of the novel use deep, wise, and philosophical statements and the individual story of Yavan sometimes stands eclectic because of the events that based upon 1937-1938 both from the aspect of fiction and characters and also language-expression are salient main deficiencies.

It can be mentioned about the modern novels that they try to reflect the Dersim tragedy in all aspects.

These avant garde narratives that focus on the historical, cultural, ethical, denominational, geographical, and folkloric aspects of the Dersim events not only handle the Dersim tragedy cold-bloodedly, but also use the technics belong to modern and post-modern novels. Especially, Haydar Karataş's *Gece Kelebeği (The Moth)* (2011) and *Oniki Dağın Sırrı (The Secret of Twelve Mountains)* (2012) are important narratives of this sense. Karataş (2011) who knew the geography, history, culture, and sociological structure of Dersim well not only produced artistic texts that presented the Dersim tragedy interweaved with a dreamy, fabulous, and gamy atmosphere, but also went beyond the emotional approach, novel technics, and the clumsiness in language of Dersim's first-generation authors. Thus, he made an important contribution to the artistic repertoire that produced about Dersim.

**A Novel Problematizing the Dominant About Dersim Tragedy:
*O Muhteşem Hayatınız (That Glorious Life of You) (2012)***

One of the works that has a different place among those which mention about Dersim tragedy in one way is Baydar's novel, *O Muhteşem Hayatınız* (2012)¹. Baydar, who grasped Dersim tragedy from the similar aspect of Karataş's, developed objective and humane comprehension toward Dersim tragedy in her work. In the novel, the individual problems in the background of a fabulous life of an opera singer who enjoys a good reputation turn into a discussion of a period full of political, social, and cultural traumas in the recent history of Turkey due to a passionate fan collecting photographs and her ethnomusicologist daughter's investigations. Thus, the individual life of a diva, named Aliye Sema, not only intersects with the political, cultural, historical, and psychological complications that stem from Dersim tragedy, but also composes a literary work which is supported by themes of love, alienation, passion, domestic problems, identity, and identity crisis, etc.

O Muhteşem Hayatınız has got three characters at the center, so it is narrated through three aspects and consists of three chapters. In the first chapter named "Diva", the narrator is the famous opera singer Aliye Sema; in the second chapter named "Arya", the narrator is the ethnomusicologist daughter of Aliye Sema; and in the last chapter, the narrator is a music teacher who is a passionate fan of Aliye Sema and collects all documents and photographs belonged to her. Of course, this classification and naming alludes to social, political, and historical period by allegorical references as well as that it reflects an individual story. Concordantly, the father of Diva refers to the Republic officer of dominant ideology, the Collector refers to the part that tries to absolve the dominant ideology at the present time, Diva refers to the Dersim person tried to be assimilated, and Arya stands for the middle class who not only unaware of her roots and what happened through history but also alienated from herself and society (Zileli, 2012). The tension and conflicts among these characters who penetrate into each others' story somehow by inner monologues and stream of consciousness both determine the plot and present different panoramas of the points of views about Dersim tragedy.

The first chapter of Diva's narration consists of two sub-sections which are narrated by Diva and her point of view. In these sections named "Life in Flea-market" and "The Missing Pieces of a Jig-saw", it is mentioned about the life of worldwide-known Aliye Sema which seems glorious when looking from outside but includes a great tragedy when analysed deeply. The plot of the novel is narrated through the tension between the real life of Diva whose past is full of pain and the gleaming life that is constructed by the passionate fan—the Collector—who forms it by the objects belonged to Diva. This dualist situation that reflects the difference

¹ First print. İstanbul: Can Publications (The pages given in this paper are from this print).

between the official discourse and basic reality related to the recent period of Turkey manifests itself from the very beginning of the novel. However, Diva asks "Which is my real life? Is it the one I live or the one he tells?" (Baydar, 2012, p. 9) before she starts to tell her story.

Diva is the only survivor child of a family who are killed during the 1937-1938 period of Dersim. Diva, who is a "upskirt child" (Baydar, 2012, p. 477) as expressed by the soldiers that joined the Dersim operation, survives because she hides under the skirt of her killed mother. Diva, who has lost her family when she is only two, has been brought up by a officer family. Diva, who does not remember much about that tragic period, feels the psychological trauma (Çevik, 2012) that she does not notice, even does not know, is dragged to the deepest of her subconscious throughout her life. Although she is brought up in well conditions—comparing with the conditions of that period—by the soldier-family that she thinks the real parents of her, sent to the conservatory and at last has become a worldwide-known prima donna, she always feels the pain that penetrated in her character and psychology. This traumatic mental situation that becomes a leit-motif as it is repeated and narrated throughout the novel by the stream of conscious and inner monologue techniques both keeps the tension of narration, excitement and changes with the stream of actions.

Diva's personal life that reflects the political, social, and cultural history of Turkey in the last century is full of personal distress like alienation, isolation, and unhappiness except the fictional and superficial dimension that is created by her fans. Diva, who cannot reveal her traumatic situation about her identity and past from her sunconscious, also cannot face it, cannot find the happiness in her daily life. She cannot go on an unhappy marriage and cannot build a healthy relationship with her daughter. She always wants to run away from herself, cannot realize herself completely and lives with questions, nightmares, and neuroticism. When this attitude that alludes to the political and social complications caused by the dominant official understanding which avoids to face its own history becomes intolerable and unsustainable, Diva begins a quest.

The event that triggers Diva's quest is her meeting with the Collector who collects all kinds of objects which belong to her. The Collector is a music teacher who admires Diva in a passionate even obsessional way. Although he has a profundity and dreams, he is an individual who cannot make his dreams come true. In other words, he is a kind of person who cannot hold on to the life in one way (Güngör, 2012). However, in the novel, he is described as "an ordinary man who cannot attract your attention while passing by in the street, for whom you do not even turn your head" (Baydar, 2012, p. 14). The Collector, who tries to collect the stuffs of Diva whom he admires and create a "wonderful life" to her through the stuffs he has collected throughout his life, calls Diva when he has found the photographs of Diva's childhood and some documents belonged to her among the stuffs that he has bought from flea-market. The period of meeting is a stage full of references to the social, political, and communal issues. After all, Diva, who represents the Dersim person tries to be assimilated on one hand and the dominant discourse that tries to face its late history on the other hand, reflects political, social, and cultural atmosphere that face itself when she begins to get a specific democracy background and to grow to maturity. The Collector represents the ordinary masses of people who do not want this process of transformation, reject time to time, but on the other hand, attribute to the process unconsciously and finally are obliged to accept the emergent transformation. However, the Collector, who has thought to clench the "wonderful life" of Diva when he has given the childhood photographs of her, brings her in on a probe of her childhood more and they start a process of that "they cannot follow the shortcut, roads followed by and follows other roads" (Baydar, 2012, p. 16) together.

In the novel, the pursuit of Diva's real identity is given incrementally (Aydın, 2012). When the suspicion created by the infancy photographs that do not come out among the photographs brought by the Collector is combined with the sound and memory penetrated in her subconscious, Diva examines her past more determinedly and consciously. However, she adapts to the new situation easily when her real life comes to light. On the other hand, her growth to maturity from the aspects of age, culture, background, and personality makes facing her past easier. Certainly, while the gunshots and screams of people and the sounds of nature that have penetrated into blurry reflections of her subconscious are being repeated as a leitmotif, Diva's preservation of the ethnic and local tone of her voice—trained in a Western and modern way—steps up Diva's finding her real life. This struggle of Diva to meet her roots also alludes to the transformation, changes process of the dominant discourse and government as it has been in the other chapters of the novel. That an individual grows to maturity, finds out her/his reality after the end of a certain process and achieves her/his existence in some sort in micro level means that the government or the dominant point of view reckons with the dark and misty leaves of its own history.

In the second chapter of the novel titled "Arya", as it can be understood from the title, there is Arya in the center of narration. Arya, who functions as a narrator in this chapter, is in position of the one who is a source of the point of view at the same time. Arya, who has not met her mother—Diva—for a long time, is a musicologist who lives an ordinary middle class life with her two sons and husband (Zileli, 2012). She does research about ethnic and authentic music and gives lectures in the university at the same time. Arya, who sticks to the traditional music of American Indians—particularly Mayas and Aztecs—and is an academician inclined to the Western culture, is alienated from her own society, specifically her mother and thus herself ironically. With this attitude, she both represents the intelligentsia who is engaged to orientalism and she is indifferent to the cultural, social, geographical, and historical codes that provide her existence.

Arya begins to seek her mother's origin both in order to build a healthy relationship with her and to stand out amongst the intelligentsia alienated from his/her society. Certainly, that the reckoning with the government's problems about the late political history which should be solved builds another meaning of this quest. In this sense, the narration which is formed in a suitable atmosphere with the conjuncture takes on a different dimension with Arya's entrance—"like an unexpected guest" (Baydar, 2012, p. 209)—to the life "which flows like a calm river" (Baydar, 2012, p. 209) of her mother whom she has not met for a long time and who "has lost among the white mist, white sounds" (Baydar, 2012, p. 203) in her conscious. Hereby, it should not be forgotten the hidden contributions of the Collector who has sent the photographs of Diva to Arya. The Collector is putting pressure on Diva in order to prevent her change, meeting with her origins, reality and is trying to produce a life and memory full of happiness for her on the one hand; on the other hand, he triggers the quests of both Arya and Diva unintentionally.

Arya goes to Dersim for her compilation of local music in a superficial sense, but in reality, she goes there in order to seek the origins of her mother and hereby to repair the nervous and problematic relationship between her and Diva. This quest brings the Dersim perception formed, especially, according to the official discourse into question. The author, who tells the reasons of political, social, geographical, ethnic, and denominational problems—especially the events in 1937-1938 in Dersim—and their reflections on the current in the context of Arya's impressions, discusses the dominant viewpoint about the Dersim tragedy. However, in the novel, it is emphasized how intricate to comprehend the Dersim reality completely, because:

Dersim reality is profound, sometimes blurry, and it is plural. Victim tells her/his story as he feels. Sometimes you get the impression that the truth is bent but what the victim tells is her/his own truth. In fact, if the nub and the node of the centuries old story can be comprehended, it can be easy to understand, everything becomes clear. (Baydar, 2012, p. 277)

That is what Arya is trying to do. While she is seeking the dark and tragic points in her mother's identity, she finds herself in a multidimensional Dersim reality. The names of the places—especially Dersim—that are changed (Baydar, 2012, p. 276), that the region is a multicultural one where Kurds, Zazas, Turks, and Armenians live together (Baydar, 2012, p. 279), that the region can continue its existence resistingly in some way although it has been attacked for ages (Baydar, 2012, p. 285) are mentioned in the novel. One of the most important features of Dersim—which is surrounded by mountains on its four sides, impassible for the mortals, a place where the good and bad angels fight and which people take refuge in the protectiveness of the mountains, rivers, rocks, forests—is its multicultural atmosphere that includes the music, whirl, nature, folklore, and folk wisdom created by Alevi identity. It is also told that the Dersim people are exposed to sorrows because of their denominational identity. The author, who tries to reflect the current panorama of Dersim, mentions about the antidemocratic practices that are intensified after 1980, burned forests, deported villages (Baydar, 2012, p. 339), routinized raids, skirmishes, operations (Baydar, 2012, p. 355), and festivals estranged from its purpose because of the tension among the organizations in the region and the conflicts of local power (Baydar, 2012, p. 361), the intolerance among the tribes and the dams wanted to be built upon Munzur. The author, who depicts the general panorama of Dersim, tries to look closely at the tragedy experienced in Dersim in 1937-1938 in order to find out the dark and blurry individual history of Diva, in other words, her tragic childhood.

Arya's searching in Dersim ended with her reach to her mother's origins. It is understood that her mother was actually an "upskirt child" according to the soldiers who had occupied in Dersim at that time and "one of the lost girls of Dersim" (Gündoğan, 2012) according to some researches' conceptualizing. In fact, this situation does not excite the readers as it does not implicated throughout the novel is pretty important from the point that Arya reaches her own reality through her mother's origin, repairs the nervous relationship between her and her mother and, of course, has a closer and inside look at society which she lives in. However, when she combines the things that she has listened to in Hozat's village, namely Lolan Taner, with the childhood photographs and memories of her mother, she learns that her mother's, Aliye Sema, real father is a violinist in Dersim. Aliye Sema survives as she has hidden under the skirt of her mother who has been killed with her violinist father and brother, and has brought up with a different name and identity by being taken by a military officer. To face with this reality shakes up Arya, more than Diva. Diva's acceptance is much easier since she has always carried this "not as a clear knowledge, a conscious reality that has come out, but as a thing that she has had in her deep, dark corner of somewhere" (Baydar, 2012, p. 441). Thus, Arya, who has accomplished her real purpose of coming to Dersim, returns as one who has learnt about her mother and, thereby, her own reality. She resolves the problems and tension between her and her mother. They start a happier and healthy mother-daughter relationship together.

The last chapter of the novel, named "the Collector", consists of the evaluation of the whole events from the Collector's point of view. When the Collector triggers Arya's and Diva's quest, questioning their past unintentionally and involuntarily; on the other hand, he tries to protect the dominant perception about Diva and even he tries to build more perfect and ideal life for her consciously, in a intentional, determined, and planned way. However, the Collector who sets off "to write a glorious story" (Baydar, 2012, p. 449) does not want to accept the Diva's past full of pain, and her Dersim identity. According to him, that Arya and Diva's waking up

the past, seeking their origins is the result of the ethnic and denominational tendencies that have become widespread after the 1980s (Baydar, 2012, p. 462). When he realizes that this determination has not any effect, he gets down to protect his perception about Diva by telling Arya that “your mother’s real identity is her artist character. Her voice, songs, stance. She is a diva. It is not important who has bred her as she is not the person given birth any more, she is what she is” (Baydar, 2012, p. 459). Nevertheless, he reacts against Arya, because she problematizes the glorious life that he has built from the photographs and memories for Diva and he describes her as a “sinister critic who has read the text secretly when he is about to finish the novel, gets ready to end his novel after finishing the last chapter” (Baydar, 2012, p. 452).

The Collector’s, who accuses Arya of stealing her mother from him, fear and panic is the burst of his bubbles rather than the collapse of Diva’s glorious life (Baydar, 2012, p. 461). The Collector, who has become morbid at that point, attempts to manipulate the reality as a last resort. He creates a different infancy for Diva with false photographs and wants both Arya and Diva to believe in this artificial and fictional story (Baydar, 2012, p. 464). That all his trials remain inconclusive paves the way for the development of the idea of self-criticism in his mind. However, he says:

If I had not hurry so much in sending those photographs. I did not do this malafide. I just wanted to relieve Her. It served as a doubt rather than a relief. Sometimes I can be such an idiot! As my wife says when she gets angry, I am a half-autistic person. (Baydar, 2012, p. 461)

As a result of this self-criticism and questioning, he sets the photographs, letters, and things which he has collected in order to build a glorious life for Diva up on a fire. This burning act forms the climax of the Collector’s depression and crisis. Finally, the collapse of Diva’s glorious life that he has built gets him into depression. Naturally, this depression and the following period of rehabilitation form the first step of the Collector’s transformation and his acceptance the reality about Diva. Thus, the narration, which is completed in the context of three people, three points of view and includes political, cultural, historical, and cyclical references, ends.

Conclusions

The discussion, which continues in the context of studies with the political, social, cultural, and artistic studies about the events experienced in Dersim in the first period of Turkish Republic—especially in 1937-1938, problematizes the official discourse about the tragic leaf of recent political history. Artists produce works in many branches of art in order to reflect experiences, and make an impression upon the conscious of society, so the victims can be understood and such experiences do not occur again. The authors, who try to tell the Dersim tragedy from different points of view especially in novel, somehow attribute to the discussions about the official discourse on this point. However, some authors cannot reach to a level of art as some of them have lost themselves in the tragedy of events, some are mostly engaged to ideological stance, some aim at legalizing the official discourse implicitly. Briefly, the reflection of these events, which are both responsibility and a unique source for art, to the novel form is always tormented. Thus, the examples of modern novel in recent period and Oya Baydar’s novel—named *O Muhteşem Hayatınız*—which is the main concern of our study, should be evaluated in a different way. As Baydar handles the Dersim tragedy sensibly, is not engaged to any ideological discourse much, she understands the reality of period more individually and freely so she can create a literary taste. Baydar touches on the political, cultural, historical, and psychological complications

created by Dersim tragedy, and thus she can problematize the official point of view and dominant memory about the 1937-1938 period in Dersim. On the other hand, *O Muhteşem Hayatınız*, which is supported by the themes of love, alienation, passion, problematic family relationships, crisis of identity and personality, etc., can be accepted as a successful work that achieves to be a literary text although it has some defects in its plot, is suitable to the current political conjuncture with the effect of author's journalist identity.

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