

Violence and Postcoloniality in Yaşar Kemal's *Memed, My Hawk*

Esra Mirze Santesso
University of Georgia

For Raymond Williams, the deepest significance of the novel is its ability to advocate “social change” by presenting a realistic vision of the intricate relationship between individual and society. Without this “social dimension,” he argues, the novel moves towards acute “subjectivism,” which isolates the substance from its immediate environment. For Williams, it is imperative that in novels “society is seen in fundamentally personal terms, and persons, through relationships, in fundamentally social terms. The integration is controlling, yet of course it is not to be achieved by an act of will. If it comes at all, it is a creative discovery” (“Yaşar Kemal’s Novels” 85). And he adds, “Whenever I am asked to give an example of a contemporary novelist of this kind, my first name is Yaşar Kemal” (83).

Yaşar Kemal, the acclaimed Turkish writer of Kurdish descent, published his masterpiece *Ince Memed* (*Memed, My Hawk*) in 1955. The novel describes the misfortunes of the title character, a young, orphaned farmer living in a small village in southern Anatolia during the early years of the Turkish republic. Memed’s village is ruled by a self-appointed feudal lord named Abdi Agha, who reigns over the uneducated peasants as a despot. He is infamous for his cruelty, but no one challenges his rulings, which cover everything from economic activities to social aspects of village life. The Agha’s constant physical and emotional abuse shapes Memed’s later life: in his late teens, Memed decides to run away from the village with Hatçe, his love interest, who is promised to the Agha’s nephew against her will. Abdi Agha tracks the lovers, and during a brief stand-off, Memed kills the nephew and wounds the Agha. After bargaining for Hatçe’s safety, Memed reluctantly deserts his lover and takes to the mountains in order to evade imprisonment. With the help of a surrogate father, Süleyman, he joins Mad Durdu’s band of outlaws. It turns out that the mountains are home to many bandits, whose criminal acts have led them to live like outcasts, pillaging travelers to survive. Gradually, Memed develops into a reputable *eskiya*, a brigand in his own right, with the mission “to take from the rich and give to the poor and rectify the wrongs inflicted on the innocent” (Seyhan 92).¹ Inspired by his experiences with injustice and marginalization, he slowly becomes a voice for disenfranchised peasants. With his social agenda and strong ethics,

Memed gains the support and admiration of the oppressed villagers, and emerges as a new type of social revolutionary fighting for a much-needed land reform.

Critics at home and abroad have pointed to this work as an example of the “new world literatures” which emerged after the Second World War outside the Western canon, yet which continued to reflect Western notions of social justice. By blending regional motifs with universal themes, they argue, Kemal is able to transcend “the entirely local and autochthonous setting of the fertile Chukurova in southern Turkey,” and “open out to the universal world of humanity” (Binyazar 205). Many critics highlight the novel’s employment of Turkish folkloric theme and echoes of the Turkish oral tradition, especially the well-known tales of Karacaoğlan and Koroğlu.² Yet while Kemal invokes a familiar framework, he also employs various stylistic innovations, most obviously by merging the traditional form with the more contemporary form of the novel.

At the beginning of the century, Kemal and his contemporaries were drawn to the novel, a genre imported from the West, due to its dialogic structure as well as its capacity to mirror life. For Kemal, as for Williams, it was important to represent rural life realistically and address its struggles with modernization. Because of that emphasis on rural life, some early critics categorized Kemal’s work as “village fiction,” which Talat Halman describes as an exploration of the mistreatment as well as the backwardness of the peasants who serve as living reminders of the ancient feudal order: “The drama is enacted in terms of economic and psychological deprivation, blood feuds, stagnation and starvation, droughts, the tyranny of the gendarme and petty officers, and exploitation at the hands of landowners and politicians” (99).³ Other scholars view Kemal’s work as responding directly to Turkish nationalism. Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar, for example, argues that the novel is an overt exploration of the challenges of nationhood: “The realist tendency to depict the living conditions and social problems in Turkey, first within an urban, and then a rural context complemented the nation-building efforts of the republican institutions” (147-8). Both categories—village and national fiction—affirm Kemal’s investment in the social dimension of the novel, expressing the challenges of negotiating personal rights in rural communities in the absence of a stable, centralized state authority. Partly because of the novel’s national/international success, Memed remains arguably the most celebrated hero in Turkish literature—to the extent that many peasants in Anatolia were certain that the protagonist was a real person.⁴ But there is a basic contradiction in the ways in which Kemal’s work has been viewed, and it lies in the understanding of the role of the peasantry. In village fiction, the peasants are traditionally portrayed as exploited and mindless bumpkins; in nationalist fiction, the peasants are full individuals set against mindless oppressors and anti-nationalist enemies. Somehow, Kemal’s peasants have been identified as both.

What I would like to suggest, as a way of resolving this contradiction and furthering these conversations, is a new way of looking at *Memed*

fifty-seven years after its first publication, i.e. examining the novel's treatment of the relationship between violence and subjectivity through postcolonial theory. In other words, I will show how postcolonial theory can help the reader study more fully the ramifications of using violence—both on a personal and communal level—to attain a political voice. Memed's use of violence creates an interesting paradox: as a “noble-bandit,” he both legitimizes the state (attracting the police, who for the first time establish a regular presence in his village), and also subverts it (as his violent campaign is a constant reminder of the state's inability to pass land reform and displace the local chieftains). I suggest that *Memed* can be read as a post-imperialist yet pre-nationalist text that explores the challenges of interpellating the subaltern into the national sphere. Unable to transition from a feudal subject to a citizen protected under law, Memed is forced to live on the margins. His survival depends on his ability to participate in violent acts, not only to protect his own well-being, but also to sustain the myth of the noble brigand which is crucial for gaining the support of the peasants in his fight against injustice. In this way, Kemal is able to articulate what Edward Said observes as “the uneasy relationship between nationalism and liberation” (54). The author seems to suggest that when a peasant located at the fringes of a newly-emerging nation fails to develop national consciousness (and hence remains outside the political sphere) only the use of violence can make him visible to the state.

It is important to clarify at this point that my intent is not to define *Memed* as a postcolonial novel in the traditional sense. Lately, in the light of the discussions of “newly emerging literatures,” postcolonial literature has come to be employed indiscriminately (and dangerously) as a label to designate any group of non-Western texts that work to counter Eurocentrism. Using postcolonialism as a blanket term to cover such vast geographical and intellectual territory, however, is not only deceptive, but also counter-productive, in the sense that it dilutes the meaning of the postcolonial experience. Aijaz Ahmad counsels us against such errors as he contends that postcolonialism should not be viewed as a “polite way of saying non-white, not Europe, or perhaps non-Europe-but-inside-Europe” (Mongia 8). In similar fashion, Stephen Slemon maintains that postcolonialism should not develop into an empty signifier to denote “both Second and Third-World literary texts” when they do not express “a radical and contestatory content” (Mongia 75). In this sense, it is more productive to think about postcolonial literature as the articulation of the cultural, political, and psychological ramifications of often-violent resistance to imperialism. Frantz Fanon emphasizes violence as a key element of postcolonial struggle, contending that colonialism “is violence in its natural state and it will yield only when confronted with greater violence” (61). Granted, *Memed* neither foregrounds the idea of resistance (although anti-colonial struggle is a subtle theme), nor celebrates the decolonization efforts of the nationalist rebels at the end of World War I. However, the novel does explore the idea of violence in the context of fading colonial power, and if we understand violence more broadly, as on

one level an effect and instrument of the individual quest for social justice in a newly-emerging postcolonial state, then *Memed* does provide interesting insights into the less glamorous postcolonial question of subaltern identity and its access to citizenship. While it may not take colonial resistance as its central theme, *Memed* nevertheless does engage, on a more subtle level, “with the enduring reality of colonial power” (Ashcroft et al. 195).

What I argue, then, is threefold: first, that Kemal’s description of the setting (namely Chukurova) as a contested site allows us to consider various forms of resistance which complicate certain definitions of postcolonial geography; second, that the examination of violence through a Fanonian lens can enhance our understanding of Memed’s portrayal as a social rebel; and third, that the subaltern’s engagement with and response to violence can illuminate certain challenges to national integration which are infrequently commented upon. Despite the lack of explicit anti-colonial struggle, then, the novel manages to shed light on the gap between the nationalist rhetoric of the new state’s center (the national government in Ankara) and the reality of nationalization on the periphery (rural parts of Anatolia). A postcolonial reading of *Memed* with an emphasis upon the significance of violence offers a new way of studying the politics of resistance and identity.

The setting of the novel presents us with our most immediate opportunity to examine its treatment of resistance in a historically contested space. Kemal depicts the Chukurova region as a strangely postcolonial one after the defeat of the French troops who arrived there at the end of World War I.⁵ The invasion of southern Anatolia by a Western imperialist power generated a strong response from the local peasants, who organized a spontaneous and successful insurgence. Kemal recognizes the significance of this resistance as one of the rare moments in the book where various segments of the populace unite: “[T]he brigands, the deserters, the irregulars, the thieves, those who were good-for-nothing and the honest men, the young and the old, all the people of the Chukurova joined in the fight to throw the enemy out of the plain” (*Memed* 247). As opposed to identifying with their ethnic heritage, which was the traditional norm of affiliation at the time, the insurgents think of themselves as a people, united against a common enemy to protect the land. This mentality echoes Fanon’s discussions of the Algerian independence from the French, where he argues that “the native’s violence unifies the people. By its very structure, colonialism is separatist and regionalist. Colonialism does not simply state the existence of tribes; it also reinforces it and separates them. [...] Violence is in action all-inclusive and national” (94). Yet there is very little to suggest in Kemal’s work that violence is specifically *national*. Here the people fight to maintain the traditional status-quo, even when that remains at odds with the modern Turkish nationalist agenda. Indeed, Kemal’s descriptions of the anti-colonial struggle in the region reflect neither a formation of national consciousness there nor an

unequivocal military commitment to the broader Turkish War of Independence. What Kemal rather describes is a localized collective will that recognizes an outside peril, threatening to disrupt the insulated and essentially pre-modern culture within which they function. In a moment of crisis, they come together to defend and preserve the land, and along with it, the old system of feudalism. In other words, the spontaneous resistance of the inhabitants of the region is not indicative of their support for an independent state, but rather inadvertently coincides with the nation-building project without necessarily participating in it or even backing it.⁶

But perhaps this would be less of a surprise for the Turkish reader, since that same region had long been a site of resistance, never fully identifying itself with the various larger political structures of the region as they came into place. Even at the height of the Ottoman Empire, the Chukurova valley was constantly inundated by troops ordered to “domesticate” its nomadic Turkoman tribes. An old brigand in Memed’s band relates the story as he recalls the resistance of the tribes against the Ottoman decree:

I remember [...] the great struggle against the Ottomans, in which the Ottomans were victorious. They captured our Kozanoghlu and carried him off. Then they exiled the Ashvars to Bozok and scattered the whole tribe. [...] Then the Ottomans settled the tribes by force in the Chukurova and distributed fields to them and drew up deeds of possession. They stationed soldiers on the mountain roads so that we might no longer migrate to the summer pastures in the highlands. The nomads died like flies in the Chukurova, some from malaria, some from the heat or some from epidemics among them. But the nomads had no intention of settling down. (*Memed* 246)

This passage refers to the events of 1876 when the Ottomans forced nomadic minorities to settle so that they could contribute to state economy by taming and cultivating the land as farmers. The assimilation policy of the Ottomans was met with resistance; many refused to give in to the demands of the Ottoman administration and revolted. In the novel, Kemal alludes to the epic tales of Turkoman rebels which were recorded orally in the poems of a well-known bard, Dadaloghlu. Yet, with the growing hostility of the settled farmers as well as the military intervention of the Ottomans, who strategically cut off the roads to summer pastures, the nomads were eventually forced to concede defeat, and accepted mandatory settlement.⁷ The Ottoman government succeeded in interpellating the nomads into the colonial space by requiring them to pay taxes as well as to serve in the very military that was operating against them. Settled life, in the end, contributed to the disappearance of a minority culture; “the old Turkoman way” disappeared, and the more widespread feudal system—itsself ancient and hardly touched by the new imperial culture—reigned supreme (244).

The setting of the novel, then, is a region emerging from a typically postcolonial experience of violence against a foreign colonial power (the French) yet also one in which the native population does not necessarily possess a post-imperialist, nationalist mentality. What is even more

interesting is that the inhabitants of the valley identify neither with their own ancient ethnic traditions (nomadism, for example), nor with the larger empire that oppressed them (Ottoman); rather they identify with the enduring feudal structure encouraged by the Ottomans as an alternative to nomadism—even now that the Ottoman empire has disappeared. With the establishment of the republic, the government in Ankara has removed the local chieftains in rural parts of the country, yet the state is hardly able to reach the periphery as a legitimate political authority. The physical remoteness of the villages contributes to the political marginalization of the peasants, who cannot imagine themselves as extensions of a newly-emerging nation. Indeed, the opening lines of the novel reinforce the idea of segregation: Kemal describes the valley as “boundless, wilder and darker than a forest,” where “a deep silence, a frightening stillness” reigns (3). In his description of Memed’s village (Dikenli), the author continues to invoke an archaic world untouched by modernity:

Dikenli is a world by itself, with its own laws and customs. The people of Dikenli know next to nothing of any part of the world beyond their own villages. Very few have ever ventured beyond the limits of the plateau. Everywhere nobody seems to know of the existence of the villages of Dikenli or of its people and their way of life.
(4)

Memed’s village is not merely isolated from the nation, but from the very idea of nationalism; the peasants cannot identify themselves with the modern state since their worldview is limited to their immediate historic condition. The Agha is the only source of authority that the villagers know, and although the Agha represents an unjust system, it is the system which the villagers are familiar with. Their geographical marginalization, in this sense, contributes to their political isolation; they rarely express an interest in exploring what lies beyond the boundaries of the valley. Consequently, they close themselves to ideas that come from the “outside” world. Although they are vaguely aware that there is a “great government” in Ankara, they do not fully grasp the significance of what that suggests. The state makes its presence known only through the rare appearance of its representatives—like the tax collector or the police commander. These individuals are always viewed as outsiders: “Even the tax collector goes there only every two or three years, and he has no contact with the villagers” (4).

So, this is hardly the backdrop for a simple fable of “nation-building,” or for a tale of black-and-white social injustice, as certain earlier critics have inferred. Instead, we have a confused and complex historical setting which Memed, for one, perceives as requiring blunt and radical force to change. The strange relationship between feudalism and modern statism in the valley is crucial in understanding the motives behind Memed’s violence. The new Turkish state openly disavows the feudal system and the tyranny of the local *aghas*, yet it has replaced them only with capitalist exploitation and land-grabs.⁸ As Kemal explains in the novel:

After the First World War, the new government tried to put an end to the feudal land tenure, abolishing what remained of the unbounded power of the landlords. In any case the feudal system was breaking up of itself. A class of newly rich was coming to the fore, most of them seeking to gain possession of as much of the fertile soil as possible. They succeeded by all sorts of means in wresting the land from the poor, in the course of a great struggle between the people and themselves. (247)

The *nouveau riche*, choosing to exploit obscure rural targets so as to escape the attention of the state, emerge as local despots, replacing the old feudal lords, and as a result, “all the landless villagers [...] become [...] serfs, toiling in the fields that had once been their own” (249). What results is a system described by scholars as “even more unfavorable to the peasants than...medieval feudalism,” in which the laborers depend completely on the landlord (who controls the entire surplus) and are not allowed to leave the land.⁹ Trapped in a liminal, pre-modern, and forgotten enclave, Memed cannot report the abuses of the Agha to the modern state, since the state is hardly aware of his region’s existence in any practical sense. It is a situation which benefits from a postcolonial reading and postcolonial terminology: Memed is truly subaltern, and the question therefore becomes how these unknown people, oppressed by earlier outside powers, now forgotten and voiceless in their own nation, gain political agency?

Memed’s first answer to this question is conventional for the region: he becomes a brigand. “In those days brigandage was a kind of fashion,” not because people desired to be outlaws, but because it was, in a way, their only means to appeal the Agha’s decisions (284). The position of the brigand indicates double marginalization: not only are they alienated from the nation as subaltern subjects, but they are also estranged from their immediate village communities for challenging the rule of the agha. And of course, brigandage requires violence; in Mad Durdu’s band, Memed assists him in robbing villagers. However, though the brigand is marginalized and exists outside the colonial/national space, the type of violence he exerts should not be classified too quickly as liberatory or progressive. Unlike Memed, Mad Durdu is motivated by personal gain and reputation, which he hopes to attain through the humiliation of his victims. Stripping the clothes off the peasants’ backs, Mad Durdu proclaims: “We take their underpants, so that our fame will spread around the countryside. Mad Durdu is the only brigand who takes underpants too. Let them know that they have been robbed by Mad Durdu” (116). Watching Durdu’s self-gratifying acts repulses Memed, who assists him reluctantly: “Memed’s face was dark with anger and his hands were trembling. However many bullets there might be in his rifle, he wanted to fire them all into Durdu’s head” (115). He realizes that the mountains do not necessarily give him the kind of freedom he seeks, but instead offer one wretched despot in place of another: “There’s no difference between the mountain and the prison. There are leaders in both places, and those who follow are their slaves” (101). Memed recognizes that Abdi Agha and Durdu are not that different from one another; both are motivated by greed

and something of an inferiority complex, and both achieve power through the degradation of the peasants.

Disillusioned with brigandage, Memed breaks his ties with Durdu, and refuses to employ violence unless it is justified. This is part of the reason Memed transitions from a common brigand to a brigand with a social agenda, using violence not only for self-protection but also to instigate reform. His transformation marks the novel's moment of true revolution; Memed recreates himself as an independent brigand, becoming what Kemal calls *mecbur*. A Turkish loanword from Arabic meaning "committed," *mecbur* designates those who are forced by circumstances to take radical action against cruelty.¹⁰ As Seyhan notes, the term indicates "a belief so strong that the character who has it cannot act against it" (91).¹¹ Memed's metamorphosis into a committed *eskiya* indicates that his rebellion, initially motivated by self-preservation, has transformed into a political one as he becomes more and more obsessed with the notion of social justice. Now, his political agenda triggers a re-evaluation of the meaning and value of violence, not against villagers but against despots of all stripes. From that moment on, violence becomes a political tool; he vows to punish Abdi Agha and reclaim the village for the peasants. His moral uprightness and social agenda make him a legend. Rumors about him circulate: "Bullets can't harm him" say some, while others declare that "He is a giant" (*Memed* 267). İlhan Başgöz contends that Memed gradually becomes the "embodiment of the most primitive protest" (40), as he assumes a larger role as "the personification of people's anger" (Altamirano qtd. in Frazer 97). While his political consciousness is still relatively underdeveloped and simplistic, he quickly becomes a symbol of hope in the grim lives of the peasants.

Memed's reputation spreads as his violence becomes more severe. While pursuing Abdi Agha to his hide-out in Aktozlu village, he wreaks havoc upon the neighboring houses; with the encouragement of an older brigand, the Sergeant, he sets fire to the whole village to corner Abdi Agha:

In less than twenty minutes ten houses were ablaze. [...] The flames rose even higher, scattering sparks into the sky, bending and twisting as they fitfully lit up the darkness. [...] Villagers were running hither and thither in their white underclothes, trying to save their possessions from the burning houses as the fire spread. (234)

Memed understands that force is necessary to overthrow a despot (although the fire here is partly accidental, and he later regrets the pain it caused innocent bystanders). He becomes obsessed with the idea of killing the Agha, and violence becomes a route to justice: "He may be dead, but I wanted to see the body with my own eyes. [...] He was roasted to death. If I should die now, I would no longer care" (236-7). It is possible to argue that Memed's desire for revenge fits the Fanonian model of violence: "The starving peasant, outside the class system, is the first among the exploited to discover that only violence pays. For him there is no compromise, no possible coming to terms: colonization and decolonization are simply a

question of relative strength” (61). For Memed’s accomplice, the Sergeant, the destruction of a village is a small price to pay for justice: “If they’ve lost their homes, they’re still not much worse off than before. They’re as poor as they’ve always been” (235). Memed, who sympathizes with the misery of the peasants, nevertheless believes that his actions are necessary, and indeed, justified. According to Fanon, this type of “counter-violence” has a positive effect on the oppressed:

At the individual level, violence is a cleansing force. It rids the colonized of their inferiority complex, of their passive and despairing attitude. It emboldens them, and restores their self-confidence. Even if the armed struggle has been symbolic, and even if they have been demobilized by rapid decolonization, the people have time to realize that liberation was the achievement of each and every one and no special merit should go to the leader. (51)

For Memed, violence directed to the wrong-doer has a cathartic effect; it allows him to reverse injustices, makes himself heard, and grants rights to peasants who cannot speak for themselves. In short, Memed’s commitment to violence rises out of his desire to transform subaltern man so that, as Fanon would say, he can regain his dignity and to contend with the trauma of his oppression. Indeed, when he does realize this dream, setting a fire which appears to kill the Agha, he declares: “Slavery is ended! Until I die, I’ll watch over the fields, with my rifle in my hands” (*Memed* 275). Kemal shrewdly introduces a twist unanticipated by Fanon: if a desire to correct a personal wrong coincides with a larger political agenda (to remove a despot from power), does the righting of that wrong end the actor’s subalternity?

Initially, the answer seems to be “yes.” The peasants at first celebrate Memed’s success, greeting him as a local hero as they publicly praise his bravery in pursuing and killing the Agha: “‘Our Slim Memed!’ ‘No more begging like dogs.’ ‘No more selling the cows.’ ‘No tyranny!’ ‘Everyone can go where he wishes.’ ‘Everyone can have guests in their own home’” (276). They all support Memed’s social agenda—at least until they hear about the Agha’s miraculous survival. It is at this moment that Kemal’s representation of violence deviates from the Fanonian model; even though the conditions for a more collective revolt is now possible, the villagers now fail to unite around Memed. Despite what initially looks like growing public support, Kemal repeatedly portrays Memed’s treatment by the peasants as fickle; they rarely aid Memed when there is an open threat, and they constantly switch sides out of self-interest. Thus, when they realize Abdi is only wounded, their praise for Memed turns to condemnation: “‘That pauper Ibrahim’s son!’ [...] ‘The idiot!’ ‘He’s become a brigand and burns villages!’ ‘He can’t even carry a gun.’ ‘He’s become a brigand and wants to hand out our Agha’s field and oxen as if they were his own.’” (281). The villagers mark him as a nuisance, as the cause of strife and a disruption in their traditional lives, which, if unjust, are at least predictable and familiar. Even though Memed himself idealizes

the peasants, Kemal remains a realist, and the novel's depiction of their situation is hardly optimistic—or simplistic.¹²

The counter-intuitive position of the peasants is a complete reversal of how Fanon portrays violence as a unifying force, and also of his depiction of the peasant worldview and peasant behavior. Fanon, we remember, argued that the committed rebel is able, through violence, to invoke feelings of solidarity among the community, providing a strong impetus for resistance:

Violence alone, violence committed by the people, violence organized and educated by its leaders, makes it possible for the masses to understand social truths and gives the key to them. Without that struggle, without that knowledge of the practice of action, there's nothing but fancy-dress parade and the blare of trumpets. There's nothing save a minimum of readaptation, a few reforms at the top, a flag-waving: and down there at the bottom an individual mass, still living in the middle ages, endlessly marking time. (147)

Of course here, Fanon's discussion of violence is focussed on anti-colonial struggle. Still, the way Fanon portrays violence as a calcification of collective will against a common enemy is precisely what we do *not* see in Chukurova. In this sense, Memed's political violence does not have the effect Fanon predicts: no larger movement begins, no expanded consciousness emerges (political or economic), and no social truths are understood. As long as the Agha lives, the villagers fail to act. They are clever enough, selfish enough, independent-minded enough to recognize their best interests. One might say, indeed, that while the villagers' hearts are with Memed, their loyalties remain with the system Agha represents; however archaic it may be, it is still stable. The point here is that violence cannot be guaranteed to have any predictable effect on the minds of an entire peasant population.

Ironically, even though Memed cannot succeed in unifying the peasants through his use of violence, he is able—and in this case very predictably—to make himself visible in the eyes of the state as a criminal. Without violence, he is unrecognizable, even non-existent from the perspective of the state. Once he uses violence in a more ambitious and moral way, substituting his own authority and insight for that of the State, Memed finally comes to the attention of the “great government,” comes to exist as an institutional concern (if not yet a political individual): “They’ll send a telegram to Ankara to say that a village has been destroyed by fire. Yes, there’ll be plenty of trouble” (*Memed* 235). Especially after he rescues Hache from prison guards during a transfer, Memed becomes a classifiable menace, no longer a mere brigand bothering obscure villagers, but a threat to the machinery and legitimacy of the state:

The police set on Memed's trail had received positive orders: ‘dead or alive, bring him back, otherwise...’ There was a grim threat in that ‘otherwise.’ The men who had received such orders created havoc in every place they entered. Men, women, and children were questioned and beaten. A constant sound of lamentation rose from all the mountain villages. (*Memed* 330)

It might be said that violence has ended his subalternity and given him a voice. And ironically, Memed's violence is also what makes Dikenli visible to the state—since to get to Memed, they have to go through the villagers. The guards start “systematically combing the mountains,” and the repressive state apparatus of the police force becomes an emblematic instrument of the state, initiating contact between Ankara and Dikenli. Memed's outlaw acts, in short, introduce the villagers to the legal power and stability of the larger Turkish state.

Thus it is that, upon the Agha's return to the village and upon his cooperation with the police to capture Memed, the peasants unite to show a very subdued form of resistance. They neither openly defy the Agha's authority (in fact they appease to him by exaggerating their welcome: “We would gladly give our souls for our Agha” [346]) nor do they show any sign of dissent to the police, even after threats of torture. Rather, they escape additional brutality by refusing to use their newfound voices: “The villagers submitted to being beaten, cursed, driven from pillar to post like a flock of sheep, but not a sound escaped their lips. The whole population of five big villages was speechless” (347). By re-embracing their subalternity, by accepting their voicelessness, they resist authority—not only local but also national. In this case, by choosing not to speak, they acquire the political agency to oppose the intimidation tactics of both the state and the Agha, and hence, end their subalternity. This is a phenomenon not accounted for in Fanon.

In the end, the rebel and the peasant are on different tracks. Memed ceases to be a subaltern the minute he starts committing violence for the betterment of the society, while the peasants bring an end to their subalternity by embracing silence (which can be viewed as their first political act). Still, because Memed's violence fails to unify the peasants against the common oppressor, he finds himself occupying “a real zone of indistinction,” trapped between a liminal space of recognition and invisibility. At the end of the novel, he succeeds in killing the Agha, and rides to the house of Hürü (the woman who encouraged him to take his revenge throughout the novel) to declare: “Mother Hürü [...] It's done. Now you have no more claim on me” (370). He disappears, never to be seen again; his strategy of violence has erased him from society.

As for the peasants, although they do not consistently acknowledge or support Memed, they benefit from his violent acts: first, Memed's violence literally puts them on the map—as the Turkish state begins to intervene in the increasingly violent region, Ankara transforms from an abstraction to a more real political structure, more visible through the agents it sends to impose the law. Second, they learn the necessity of resistance in order to invoke change; even though they are not always fervent in actively engaging with violence, their passive resistance opens “the door of Dikenli [...] [to the rest of] the world” (348). In a way, Memed becomes the scapegoat, the price they have to pay for liberty. So although the peasants are not yet full citizens of the new State, they have

at least transcended the unjust ways of the feudal system to face new possibilities. As Talal Asad writes,

Within the modern world which has come into being, changes have taken place as the effect of dominant political power by which new possibilities are constructed and old ones destroyed. The changes do not reflect a simple expansion of the range of individual choice, but the creation of conditions in which only new (i.e. modern) choices can be made. The reason for this is that changes involve the re-formation of subjectivities and the re-organization of social spaces in which subjects act and are acted upon. The modern state—imperial, colonial, post-colonial—has been crucial to these processes of construction/destruction. (qtd. in Ahluwalia 52)

Although it is premature to read the peasants' rejection of the old order as part of an inevitable evolution from feudal subjects to citizens, we can view it as an early sign of a historical shift of some sort. In this sense, the novel describes the uncertainty and energy of the final stages of the pre-national mentality, as the village opens its door to the modern world.

A postcolonial reading of *Memed* sheds light on the complex, messy and often uneasy relationship between the individual and society at times of power shifts and historic change. It is a relationship which can be shaped, though not necessarily clarified, by the employment of violence. Kemal's portrayal of the bandit-hero, who not only serves as a testament to individual will, but also as an emblem of the society's desire for reform, returns us to Williams's contentions about the novel and its particular capacity to reflect and effect social change. Memed's "act of will" sets various progressive events in motion, perhaps, but as Williams points out, it cannot be the final answer, and in the end he has no place in the society he cares about, or indeed the modern world itself. Nevertheless, he has arguably inspired the kind of "creative discovery" that will, eventually, generate real and lasting social change: his social agenda, if not the violent means by which he pursues it, has taught the peasants the meaning of a "genuine community," one which Williams defines as "a community of persons linked not by one kind of relationship—work or friendship or family—but many interlocking kinds" (Long 312). As for the peasants, they are neither heroes nor abject victims. Their significance, finally, is that they learn how to forge a relationship based not on fear, but on resistance. As John Eric Thomas and Lizzie Eldridge maintain, this challenge remains at the heart of Williams's arguments about the novel's social dimension: "to develop the realist tradition at a time when old communities are disappearing and new non-local communities are to be envisioned—imagined communities" (91). Yaşar Kemal rises to this challenge.

Notes

1. It is important to point out that the term *eskiya* implies not a ruffian, but a noble bandit who "takes to the mountains not because of a crime he

committed but because of an injustice he suffered. He rights wrongs” (Seyhan 92).

2. Both Karacaoğlu and Köroğlu are well-known tales of noble-bandits which have been circulating orally since the seventeenth century. İlhan Başgöz explains that Kemal collected these legends traveling to various villages in Chukurova, and recorded them in *Üç Anadolu Efsanesi* (*Three Anatolian Legends*) which blends “various biographical legends” with Kemal’s poetic language (37).

3. The “village novel” designates the literary movement led by novelists of the early republic to record the discrepancy between the westernized urban centers and the backwardness of the rural areas in Anatolia. Often, these novels reflect the disillusionment of the Western intellectual who is baffled by the ignorance and the baseness of the villagers, and their resistance to modernization. The description of such cynicism, according to Azade Seyhan, hints at a demoralizing sense of pessimism: “What started as a sincere attempt to represent the concerns of the neglected and disenfranchised village populations,” she writes, “turned into a repetitive litany marked more by self-pity than by corrective insight” (89).

4. Altan Gökalp further explains that the interviews with peasants conducted by a journalist from an Istanbul newspaper demonstrate the public’s fascination with Memed as a hero. “In one instance,” he writes, “a peasant woman related without blinking an eye that she had been well-acquainted with the woman who rolled up Abdi Agha in a down comforter in order to get him out of the flaming house” (151).

5. The outcome of the Great War was a division of the Ottoman land as outlined in the Armistice of Mudros, among the allied forces, namely England, France and Italy, whose intention was to rule small regions as profitable colonies. Between 1918 and 1923, the French troops were in control of Southern Anatolia, including Antakya, Mersin, Osmaniye and İslahiye, Ceyhan, Adana, and Tarsus, where Chukurova is situated.

6. The War of Independence marks the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Mustafa Kemal’s military campaign against the occupiers (as well as the sultanate) and the War of Independence paved the way for the birth of the Turkish nation. By the end of 1922, Turkey declared its sovereignty as a modern state, subscribing to the enlightenment values of freedom and social justice.

7. In a later novel, *The Legend of a Thousand Bulls*, Kemal addresses this systematic domestication of the nomads, not only during the Ottoman empire but also during the governance of Adnan Menderes, the prime minister of Turkey in the 1950s. One character in the novel voices the

resentment of the nomads, stating: “They had earned the curse of the poor man, of the friend, of the father, the mother, the curse that is worse than all, for it will take effect slowly but surely” (174).

8. İlhan Başgöz gives details about the land reform which Atatürk wanted to pass as legislation at the Grand National Assembly which proposed giving land to landless peasants. However, his efforts were ineffective: “the individualistic principles of the Turkish Civil Code and Article 74 of the Turkish Constitution, which states that ‘no personal property may be taken for public use without full indemnification of the owner’ made land reform almost impossible” (44).

9. As Belma Otus-Baskett further explains, the contractual relationship between the lord and the serf is completely based on the interests of the *Agha*, whose profit is maintained through the oppression of the peasants:

In this situation, the peasant is the sharecropper under the agha, and his technology consists of the ox and the plough. The surplus crops, the produce beyond what the peasant requires for survival, remain with the landlord; there is no possibility for the peasants to rent the land. To maintain such a system, labor has to be protected and controlled because it is limited. Consequently, laborers are forbidden to leave the land. Memed must go to town secretly and return before the agha finds out. Thus, the sharecropping system constitutes a kind of serfdom. (88)

10. Azade Seyhan explains the connotation of this word by tracing its roots from Arabic: “*mecbur* (a loanword from Arabic) [...] means ‘obliged’ or ‘compelled’” (91).

11. Inspired by the true story of the sheik of Sakarya, Kemal invents Memed as an exploration of the passion of *mecbur*:

When I was young, I believed that there were ‘committed men’ in this world. Later on I realized that it was filled with men like the sheik of Sakarya whose destiny it was to revolt. For me the world is the work of these rebels; they are the essence of our humanity. They transform our universe [...]. These are the men committed to struggle, and who undertake the struggle knowing that they will lose everything, including their lives. (Bosquet 133)

12. L. O. Al’kaeva contends that the author never idealizes the peasants: “In this novel he demonstrates how, in given circumstances, the oppressed peasant can act contrary to what he knows is right, how ungrateful he can be, and how unjust” (73).

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