

From the Ottoman Empire to pre-Islamic Central Asia: Theatre as an Ideological Tool

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Abstract

After Mustafa Kemal Atatürk founded the new Turkish Republic in 1923, the country went through a swift and radical transformation. The ruling elite made use of all possible tools to impose the ideals of the new Republic. Their main objective was to break the bonds with the Islamic Ottoman past to establish a new secular national identity. The essence of the new Turkish nation was found in pre-Islamic Central Asia. This view was supported with the help of the Turkish History Thesis, which asserted that the Turks are a supreme race, and their origins are from Central Asia. The state tried to propagate this thesis by various means. The most effective tool that could reach the illiterate people during that period was the theatre. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to explore how the state disseminated the Turkish History Thesis and the values of the new Republic through theatre. The emergence of this new narrative coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Turkish Republic. The plays, written in 1933, especially for this occasion, will be analyzed to determine how they support the Turkish History Thesis and the values of the new nation. Two plays, *Akın* (*The Raid*) and its sequel *Özyurt* (*Homeland*), will be explored in detail to give an elaborate account of the ideology behind such plays written during that period.

Keywords: Turkish theatre, political theatre, Turkish History Thesis

After the Ottoman Empire was vanquished in World War I, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk launched the War of Independence (1919-1923) against Western powers. He founded the Turkish Republic in 1923 and established a new secular democratic nation. The new Republic experienced a swift and stark transformation. Many effective reforms were implemented in a short period to detach the new Turkish Republic from its Islamic Ottoman past. As a result, the Caliphate was abolished, and the Islamic law was discarded; a new alphabet was adopted, and women acquired extensive civil rights. These and many other reforms were carried out under the leadership of Atatürk in line with the Kemalist ideology. Atatürk's ideology was based on six tenets, also known as the six arrows of Kemalism. The six arrows on the flag of the Republican People's Party, which is the founding party of modern Turkey, represent these principles: Republicanism, Nationalism, Populism, Statism, Secularism, and Reformism/Revolutionism.¹ The ruling elite used all tools to disseminate the new Republic's ideals and create a new nation-state from the remains of a multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multi-lingual empire.

The ruling elite's main aim was to break the bonds with the Ottoman past to establish a new national identity. In "the late Ottoman Empire the very term 'Turk' was a term of derision used for the unsophisticated and coarse peasant, tribesman, or small-town dweller" (Ahmad 78). They focused on changing this perception, and, starting with the 1930s, they focused on constructing a new understanding of being Turkish. In the late 1920s, Turkishness was not associated with race. As Soner Cagaptay notes, during that period, the nation was trying to restore its power after decades of wars. The 1930s, however, brought forth a significant shift with the rise of nationalism. The role of race was accentuated in defining the Turkish nation. This was "an important episode in Turkish history, whose legacy seems to have imprinted itself on modern Turkey" (Cagaptay, "Race Assimilation" 86). This

episode began with the establishment of the Turkish Historical Society in 1930 under Atatürk's leadership. As the first mission of the committee was to research the roots of Turkish history, it came up with the Turkish History Thesis and wrote about their outcomes in a book entitled *Türk Tarihinin Ana Hatları* (*An Outline of Turkish History*).

The Turkish History Thesis asserted that the Turks are a supreme ancient race. The history of the Turkish people, therefore, is not merely the history of the Ottomans. The origins of Turks date back to 9,000, or 12,000, even 20,000 years before Christ. Moreover, the thesis asserted that the Turks are from the Aryan race, and they do not belong to the yellow race as some frequently hold forth. This discourse claimed that the Turks are originally from Central Asia, which was considered as the cradle of civilization ("Birinci Türk Tarih Kongresi" 124). According to this narrative, thousands of years ago, the Turks in Central Asia knew how to control nature, how to farm and tend livestock, while people in other regions were still savage. However, they had to leave their homeland due to radical climate changes, mainly because their fertile lands had turned into barren lands and swamps. As a result, the Turks migrated to China, India, Asia Minor, North Africa, and Europe. They did not have difficulty settling down and dominating these new lands as they had higher intelligence and advanced weapons (Afet 34-35).² Through a series of migrations, the Turkish race brought higher civilization to many parts of the world.

Though most of the population of the new Republic was Muslim, finding the roots in a pre-Islamic period did not constitute a problem. It was assumed that the Turks had always believed in a single Sky god, and the basic understanding of their Shamanistic religion did not contradict Islam.³ On the contrary, it was claimed that their similarities made it easier for the Turks to synthesize the Turkish culture with Islam (Kafesoğlu 160-62). The essence of the new Turkish nation, therefore, was found in pre-Islamic Central Asia. This new thesis was announced to the public at the First Turkish Congress of History in 1932.

Language also became a significant part of being Turkish. Throughout their emigration from Central Asia “language had preserved their memories, cultural characteristics, and everything else that made them a nation,” and because “the Turkish language had conserved the characteristics of the nation, only Turkish speakers could claim to be Turkish” (Cagaptay, *Islam Secularism* 52). Thus, similar to the Turkish History Thesis, the Sun Language Theory was put forth, which “claimed that all languages stemmed from Turkish” (Aydıngün and Aydıngün 420). Therefore, language was standardized in order to enhance national identity. No doubt, the Turkish History Thesis and the Sun Language Theory highlighted race in defining the Turkish nation as both were designed to serve the same aspiration of strengthening national pride.

The state tried to propagate these narratives by various means. During that period, politicians were also historians, and they greatly influenced spreading this new history discourse. In a brief period of time, history textbooks were saturated with the glorious Central Asian history. However, these books could only reach the new generation. The highly convincing tool that could reach illiterate people during this period was the theatre. Accordingly, the aim of this article is to explore how the state disseminated the Turkish History Thesis and the values of the new Republic through theatre. The emergence of this new narrative coincided with the tenth anniversary of the Turkish Republic. Thus, the plays written in 1933, specifically for the anniversary, will be reviewed in order to observe how they support the Turkish History Thesis and the values that the ruling elite wanted to implement. Two plays, *Akın* (*The Raid*) and its sequel *Özyurt* (*Homeland*) by Faruk Nafiz Çamlıbel, will be explored in detail to give an elaborate account of this issue.

Tenth Anniversary

Atatürk was greatly interested in the field of arts, especially in theatre. He ordered specific plays to be written on certain topics,

read them and asked for specific revisions, and, at times, even attended the rehearsals. Consequently, Metin And considers Atatürk as the first dramaturge of the Turkish Republic. Atatürk especially took notice of using proper Turkish and corrected certain scenes he found contrary to the values of the new Republic. For example, in a play called *Taş Bebek (The Doll)*, one of the characters makes an unpleasant remark about a female character. Atatürk crossed out the following lines and wrote: “We do not think such things about women! Women are the foundation of a nation. To see them as an ornament and to revive that thought is not right. This should change” (And, *Türk Tiyatrosunun* 369). From this short anecdote, it is clear that Atatürk was aware of the influence that the theatre had on people. He wanted to send a clear message regarding women, which suited the image of the nation he had founded. In his lifetime, he utilized the power of the theatre and incorporated its ideological function into the community centers called People’s Houses, which will be discussed later in the article. The theatre also became the most strategic and pivotal aspect of the celebrations that took place during the Turkish Republic’s tenth anniversary in 1933.

The tenth anniversary was a significant episode for the ruling elite. On the path of constructing a new national identity, the ruling elites gave great importance to celebrating their accomplishments. To supervise the celebrations, they passed a new law entitled “Celebrating the Tenth Anniversary of the Proclamation of the Republic” on June 11, 1933 (Demirhan 39). They formed a High Committee and many other minor committees to make the arrangements. These committees called on artists and asked them to write poems and plays focusing on the achievements of the past decade and the values of the new Republic. They distributed thousands of copies of various literary works written by patriotic writers. They also made twenty-five different banners that showed the differences between life before and after the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Eight thousand copies were made and distributed all over the country. Moreover, the committee requested that the press should publish more than usual on the day of the anniversary, October 29, 1933. They asked the newspapers

and magazines to publish colorful images and articles highlighting the importance of independence and the new reforms (Demirhan 54-55).

The theatre was a major part of the celebrations. The committee picked out some patriotic plays that were written before 1933, but they also asked individual writers to write more plays. As a result, many nationalistic plays were written to celebrate the principles of the new nation. Selim Nüzhet Gerçek lists all the publications that were written specifically for the tenth anniversary (443-455). Out of eighty various publications, twenty were plays; three were novels, and only two were books of poems. All the plays written in 1933 are İffet Halim Oruz's *Burla* (*Burla*), Nihat Sami Banarlı's *Bir Yuvarın Şarkısı* (*The Song of Home*) and *Kızıl Çağlayan* (*The Red Waterfall*), Burhan Cahit Morkaya's *Gavur İmam* (*Giaour Imam*), Ali Zühtü and Müçteba Salahattin's *Tarih Utandı* (*A Disgrace in History*), Kazım Nami Duru's *Uyanış* (*The Awakening*), Vasfi Mahir Kocatürk's *Yaman* (*Yaman*), and *10 İnkılap* (*10 Reforms*), Reşat Nuri Güntekin's *İstiklal* (*Independence*) and *Vergi Hırsızı* (*Tax Evader*), Aka Gündüz's *Mavi Yıldırım* (*The Blue Lightning*), and *Yarım Osman* (*Semi-Osman*), Halit Fahri Ozansoy's *On Yılın Destanı* (*Epic of a Decade*), Yaşar Nabi Nayır's *İnkılâp Çocukları* (*Children of Liberty*), and *Beş Devir* (*Five Eras*), Galip Naşit Arı's *Destan* (*An Epic*), Vedat Nedim Tör's *Birinci Teşrin* (*October*), M. Aşir and M. Ali's *Aşar Soyguncuları* (*Tax Robbers*), İbnürrefik Ahmet Nuri Sekizinci's *Şer'îye Mahkemesinde* (*The Religious Court*), Hüseyin Hüsnü's *Vatandan Vatana* (*From Country to Country*).

Apart from these plays which were requested by the committee, many other plays were written with patriotic sentiments. Some of the famous ones are: Faruz Nafiz Çamlıbel's *Ateş* (*Fire*, 1939) and *Kahraman* (*The Hero*, 1933), Necip Fazıl Kısakürek's *Tohum* (*Seed*, 1935), Nahit Sırrı Örik's *Sönmeyen Ateş* (*Unquenchable Fire*, 1933) Aka Gündüz's *Köy Muallimi* (*Village Teacher*, 1932), *Beyaz Kahraman* (*The White Hero*, 1932), Hayri Muhittin's *Gazi Mustafa Kemal* (*Ghazi Mustafa Kemal*, 1933), Hayrettin İlhan's, *Gün Doğarken* (*As the Sun Rises*, 1933), Peyami

Safa's *Gün Doğuyor* (*The Sun is Rising*, 1932), Yunus Nüzhet's *Hedef* (*The Goal*, 1934), Celal Tuncer's *Devrim Yolcuları* (*People of the Revolution*, 1937), Hüsamet'in Iřın's *Atatürk'e İlk Kurban* (*First Martyr to Atatürk*, 1935).

These plays do not reflect the societal observations of the playwrights but rather their dreams and excitement. Their aim was not to portray reality but to convey feelings of joy and ardor. The plays show how they were proud of the War of Independence and the reforms accomplished after the establishment of the Turkish Republic. These playwrights looked at the future with great hope (řener 151), so the plays were imbued with great patriotic spirit. They praised the six principles of Kemalism and the virtues of the Turkish nation. These were optimistic plays that rendered a bright future. As their objective was not to be realistic but exhilarating, the plays are full of extremely long patriotic monologues. Most of them were written for school performances and were sent to various cities and villages. They all cover similar topics: some refer to the hardships of the War of Independence and the heroic people who followed the path of Atatürk during that great ordeal, others focus on the present and the values of the Turkish Republic and the new reforms. Almost all of them praise Atatürk as a great leader, and some plays are solely about him. They also state how the ideal Turkish citizen should be like and base this topic on the Turkish History Thesis, as this thesis draws the image of exceedingly civilized ancestors with pre-Islamic Central Asian origins.

The plays advocate that the individual is insignificant, and people could be sacrificed for the good of the society or the sake of the country. They point to the enemies inside and outside the Republic but warn especially against the ones inside, those supporting the Ottoman past (And, *Türk Tiyatrosunun* 365). Ali, a character in *Tarih Utandı* (*A Disgrace in History*), for example, makes a long speech to his friends asking them to help him hide an official letter from the enemy: "You can be sure that the blood we shed here in half an hour will tomorrow create a new nation. Now my friends, instead of living a despicable life, are we all willing to die in front of a firing squad?" (Zühtü and Salahattin 11). He

persuades everyone that they should sacrifice their lives for their country. In *Beş Devir* (*Five Eras*) a young patriot also makes a similar statement: “For our purpose, we fear not death. . . . If we don’t die, our country will” (Nabi 7). In the play *Beyaz Kahraman* (*The White Hero*), a famous doctor risks his own life to test the drug he is working on. He finds the right dose, lets his assistants know the correct amount, and dies by saying: “My death means nothing as long as the honor and reputation of my nation lives” (Gündüz 33). In this play, whatever the doctor does, he does it for his country and never for personal or material gain.

Another common aspect of these plays is that the recent Ottoman past is disregarded. Metin And states that there was extreme supervision regarding the plays that were staged during that period. They wanted to cut the ties with the recent Ottoman past altogether. Even the plays of the patriotic playwright Namık Kemal⁴ (1840-1888) were banned or restricted because they referred to the recent political issues of the Ottoman era. His patriotic play *Vatan Yahut Silistre* (*Motherland or Silistra*) was performed on condition that two sentences “Long live the Sultan” and “Long live the Ottomans!” be taken out of the play (And, *Türk Tiyatrosunun* 370-71). If the Ottoman past was mentioned at all, it was to show the negative sides of the Ottoman history and its rulers. In his play *Beş Devir* (*Five Eras*), Yaşar Nabi refers to the Ottoman past as a period of darkness: “We want this red hurdle to pull away. Let this unfortunate country see the daylight” (6). The red hurdle he speaks of is Abdülhamid II, as he was also known as the Red Sultan. He continues: “A sultan who painted the whole country to crimson and knocked down every single youth who wanted to rise. Surrounded by a bunch of fools, enemy of science. . . . Thirsty for the blood of the whole country, trembles if a single ray of light enters his dungeon” (Nabi 7). He is depicted as a vicious ruler who serves ignorance and violence. The Turkish people are not responsible for the defeats they faced; the Red Sultan is to be blamed for the fall of his people: “This state has gotten so rotten within that those who reach out end up with a piece of meat in their hand. It is not the Turkish people who were defeated at Rumelia. It

is the palace, the enemy of the people, a red plague, and pitch-black vileness that was defeated” (Nabi 13). In their play *Tarih Utandı (A Disgrace in History)*, Ali Zühtü and Müçteba Salahattin draw a similar picture: “As the peasants die one by one due to starvation and poverty, this red sultan would take pleasure from the blood he shed and the families he destroyed” (6). The playwrights underscored the fact that the sultans did not care about their people's welfare or the advancement of the Ottoman Empire.

In contrast to the sultans, Atatürk as “the voice of the people, [...] is the incredible miracle of the Turks” (Nabi 24). His revolution demolished the dark past and opened up a brighter future: “The past has left us like a nightmare and Gazi [Atatürk] has turned our dreams into reality” (Nabi 31). The present is full of hope, and the Ottoman past is considered as a dark, wretched period. Thus, if the playwrights included the past in their plays, it highlighted the moral, economic, and cultural decay that had taken place primarily during the last decades of the Ottoman Empire.

The Turkish History Thesis

Instead of focusing on the Ottoman past, the playwrights propagated narratives that were based on pre-Islamic origins. They wrote about the heroic events of the past. The plays, in accordance with the Turkish History Thesis, argued that, historically, the Turks were highly civilized and gifted in the field of war, art, and culture. The genius professor Dr. Türkoğlu Dayan in the *Beyaz Kahraman (The White Hero)* is a character who is inspired by his great ancestors. He finds a cure for cancer and becomes famous worldwide. On the day of the twenty-fifth anniversary of his invention, people come to the hospital to express their gratitude. All the countries, Russia, Germany, Japan, China, Egypt, and Ireland send him thankful messages. He states that as he worked for his aim; he had to think of the “thirty-thousand-year-old honor of his people, their intellect and reputation!” (Gündüz 22). He explains how he found his motivation in his ancestors. He believes that as his ancestors “were the ones to spread civilization for the first time

in history thirty thousand years ago, it must be that they have a gem in their noble blood” (Gündüz 22). Thus, he says to himself, “You, young Türkoğlu Dayan, are a week-old novice doctor. Since you have the same blood, the same gem in your essence, you must get back to work! And from that novice doctor emerged a doctor that gave health and wellness to the world, a doctor whose name became immortal” (Gündüz 22). On this journey, he only has one purpose: “There might be careless people who might ask ‘what is your new purpose?’ We don’t have a new one. We only have a sole purpose, our first and last purpose, which is thirty thousand years old. Our ancestors who spread to the world thirty thousand years ago had one and only purpose. It was this: Towards a grand civilization! To the majestic future of the Turks!” (Gündüz 24). As illustrated, the characters are the voice of the new Turkish History Thesis. They are proud of their ancestors, and their glorious past is proof of their glorious future. They represent a new optimistic future to the people who had been through years of war and devastation. The two plays, however, that explicitly put forth the Turkish History Thesis as a story are *Akın* (*The Raid*) and *Özyurt* (*Homeland*).

Akın (The Raid)

The Raid was written at Atatürk’s request by F. N. Çamlıbel, a famous poet and playwright. It was first performed on January 4, 1932, in the presence of Atatürk, at the People’s House in Ankara (Birinci 75). The whole play is thoroughly in line with the Turkish History Thesis. It is concerned with the ancestors of the Turks in Central Asia, and how they had to leave their land due to a major climate change. As a result, they spread their great civilization to new lands.

The prologue begins with a student explaining the history of the Turks to the audience. There is a huge map on stage that shows the route of the Turkish migration in ancient times. In line with the Turkish History Thesis, the student points to the map and

states that Central Asia is the Turks' homeland, and they had to leave their land due to severe drought:

This right here is Central Asia. The homeland of the Turks.
 Turks established the first civilization in the Ural Altai region.
 Later, they gathered their instruments, paintings, statues
 And wandered throughout eastern and western lands.
 These arrows show us the migration routes.
 And inform us of the past twenty thousand years.
 You may now ask: "Why did we disperse to these strange lands
 Instead of staying where we were?"
 It will take a long time to tell you all about it; it may even bore
 you
 So, let us perform this story on stage.
 See how we scattered to Egypt, India and China.⁵ (Çamlıbel, *Akın*
 8)

At the very beginning, the sons of the three chieftains talk about a severe drought. They inform us about a dark tradition even they disapprove of. According to the tradition, if the drought continues for twelve years, they have to sacrifice the Khan to the Sky god. All three are upset about this as they are very fond of their Istemi Khan and his daughter Suna. The wise Istemi Khan is also devastated about the drought:

Why did the exuberant sound of the waters quiet down?
 If it were only the sound of the streams that died away!
 The sound of those who managed their fields and lived on
 livestock
 The sound of the motherland also disappeared with water. (22)

The Khan believes that they have no option but to emigrate. The old ones are to stay, and the young generation can find new fertile lands. He announces his daughter that the three chieftains are on their way, and, according to their traditions, they will decide on a day for his beheading. This news upsets Suna; she objects to this tradition by saying that the two Khans before him were also beheaded, but nothing had changed. She asks him to withdraw from

his position as a Khan, but he rejects such a dishonorable choice. The three chieftains who visited the oracle of the Sky god on their journey bring unexpected news. They tell Istemi Khan that the Sky god has granted his life, but his daughter Suna must be sacrificed instead. The Khan and his people grieve over this announcement. Demir, the son of one of the chieftains, uncovers the reason for this abrupt decision. Sensing that there is more to this issue, Demir visits the oracle and forcefully discovers the truth. It turns out that the three chieftains thought that the drought would not end even after the Khan's sacrifice, so they made a plan as they were next in line to become the Khan. They changed the tradition so that they would save the life of the next Khan, which was going to be one of them. Therefore, they threatened to kill the oracle and made him change the tradition to save their heads. As the truth is discovered, the three chieftains are slaughtered by the angry people of the land, and their sons take over. Istemi Khan gathers the new young chieftains and gives them a patriotic speech about their new mission to find new lands:

In that case... The fame of the Turks will mount day by day!
Come now, take your emigrating troops into your claws and
Find the sea through the mountains and plains.
As they hear your horseshoes far away
They will recognize you; they will recognize you!
They know the Turkish horseshoe from its nail.
Fly the Asian eagle all over the world.
Every city will open its doors to you, by force or ease.
Walk ahead; there are friends and foes on foreign lands.
If the world tries to dissuade you in all directions,
Then you should try to find the sea in all directions
Throw love and heavenly light to those who oppose you
Throw arrows to those who do not understand you.
...
No hand can measure swords with the Turk!
Disperse to the East, South, and West,
Go and seek breezy mountains and green plains. (66)

The three chieftains swear to go and find new lands for their people. Demir, the courageous chieftain who had discovered the truth about the oracle and his father's disgraceful plan, marries Suna and sets off to foreign lands to find a new home.

Özyurt (Homeland)

Özyurt (Homeland) is a sequel to *The Raid* and deals with what happens after the Turks finally find a new home. The play opens with the songs of the raiders. We learn that it has been twenty years since they set out to find a new place to settle. This tedious journey has come to an end as they finally reach the sea and fertile lands.

Suna, who had married the chieftain Demir (Iron), now has two children, a daughter named Işık (Light) and a son named Akın (Raid). The second scene opens with a conversation between Suna and her children. She feels that they are depressed over something and tries to learn what is distressing them. They are pleased to have found a fruitful land by the sea, with radiant rivers and a blessing nature. However, Akın says that something is missing in this land, something which makes a land someone's homeland. He believes it is because of the natives:

Would it be just to call these savages human beings?
 To call this flock, that grazes like horses, human?
 Those that have only four emotions and forty words in their
 language,
 How can you call forty words a language?
 Even the owl has a richer language than they do.
 They are far behind in terms of thought, senses and, patriotism.
 What can a Turkish soldier do here in this strange land?
 What can forty thousand do within millions like this?
 Tell me! (17)⁶

...

To be honest, if they do not adapt to us
 I am afraid we might turn out to be like them. (18)

As stated in the Turkish History Thesis, the ancestors of the Turks were considered to be highly civilized. However, during the Ottoman rule, the term Turk had a degrading meaning. Thus, by attributing the term “barbaric” to the natives, they would not only get rid of such savage qualities but also justify their raid. Akin, and later his father, the Khan, give us a highly racialized and depreciatory account of the natives. They are like wild animals, thoroughly uncivilized and in need of help and education. They do not possess a language; therefore, they cannot be negotiated with. They are in no position to fight for their lands. Thus, the Turks do not need to show brutal violence to conquer the lands, although we hear throughout the play how skilled they are in the art of war. The natives do not possess their lands; they only reside on them, which allows the Turks to take over without force.

Akin’s father, Demir Khan, joins them and assures his children that they will never lose their identity, but it will take time for the natives to understand and adapt to them. The Khan reminds him that they had traveled for twenty years and encountered many different people on the way. The natives have learned many things from them, but not once have they taken anything from the natives. He assures his children that the natives will change in time, and Suna asks her children to reach the natives through kindness and love. Akin, however, is still not convinced:

You talk of love mother but these people and love?
 The natives don’t have a drop of love in them.
 Mothers give birth to babies and as soon as they stop
 breastfeeding,
 they cut off their connection and they don’t even miss them.
 Whatever it is that makes a human a human
 Well, they have no more of that than an animal. (21)

Though Akin does not believe the natives can be civilized, we learn that Suna and Demir Khan have taken care of the native chieftain’s children. They would not even have names if it had not been for Suna and Demir. Işık states that these children learned to talk in three years; however, she complains that although they

treated them as one of their people, they still show no signs of love. As we are informed about these “savages,” the Khan receives the news that a group of great men have arrived from the motherland on horseback. The Khan is both pleased and amazed by this news. As they had travelled for twenty years, he wonders how they had found them so easily. Bilgiç, the leader of the group, explains that they found them through “their footsteps that were on every mountain and rock” and that “let alone years of flood, centuries-old seas can’t wipe away the traces the Turks have left behind” (27). Bilgiç elaborates on how Demir Khan brought civilization to every city he came across, and, consequently, the Khan’s twenty-year journey turned into a six-month trip. In thirty-eight lines, Demir Khan talks about his journey and how much, like his son, he despises the natives he encountered:

Who can call them humans? They neither have worries nor rules.

...

Who has given them the right to live? And why?

Not even a bird lives with such little thinking!

Having only the rights of a bird

How were they able to conquer these lands? (34)

Just like his son, Demir Khan also justifies his conquest with the notion of the savage natives. They are not hostile forces; they do not even really exist to be considered as a force. They do not have to fight the natives as they lack free will and any conscious action. He believes that it is his task to establish a civilization and to own such fertile lands. Bilgiç calms him down and advises the Khan to be patient and compassionate. He also announces that they have brought whatever they need to build a new city with his men.

Meanwhile, Işık, Demir Khan’s daughter, falls in love with Ozan, a young man who had accompanied Bilgiç. The Khan and Suna are aware of this, and her mother tells Işık that they will arrange her marriage as soon as they build their city and the palace. The men work day and night to build the city. When Işık asks Söğüt, one of the natives they had adopted, what she thinks of the construction, Söğüt tells her:

Please don't be angry at me for not understanding this construction stuff

One has to see something similar before to be able like this one
A right evaluation cannot be expected from a native. (44)

Even the natives themselves acknowledge how unrefined they are. Later in the play, Söğüt confesses that she has feelings for Işık's brother Akın and adds that she has learned everything she "knows" and "feels" from them:

I didn't know how to love before
I have acquired everything dear to the heart in the last three years
They didn't teach me how to listen or how to think
How can they, when even they themselves, don't know how. (50)

At the end of the play, the city and the palace are finally built. The city, which is built by the seashore, has ten thousand houses. It is finally time for Işık to get married. The natives join in the celebrations. Right before the wedding, however, Ozan, the groom, is wounded. A rock falls from the mountains on the young man. Yalçın, Söğüt's brother, confesses that he was the one who pushed the rock. It turns out that Yalçın is in love with Işık, but as a native, he has never known what love is, so he cannot utter the word, although he tries to explain it:

I don't know what happened,
My eyes and my heart filled with Işık
I wanted this sun to light only the sky

And to rise with my eyes and to set with my eyes. (77)
Demir Khan becomes furious and demands retribution. Bilgiç, however, tries to show the Khan that this is actually a great achievement as the Turks have taught the natives how to love: "Millions of idle people who have empty hearts are now opening themselves to the feelings you have offered. They are all becoming like us" (82). On his deathbed, Ozan says that if the criminal is a native, they should forgive him. At last, the Khan gives his final

order, “Break the chains!” (82) and forgives Yalçın. The highly civilized Turks have achieved to bring out real affections in the natives. The ultimate objective has been accomplished.

The People’s Houses

One of the ways that the ruling elite disseminated these nationalistic plays was with the help of the People’s Houses. The People’s Republican Party established People’s Houses in 1932. These Houses “were considered the agents of the new regime, whose main practical purpose was to uproot the vestiges of the Sultanate and its ruling group and familiarize the masses with the ideas of the Republic” (Karpas 55). They operated in nine different fields: language and literature, fine arts, drama, sports, social assistance, classes and courses, library and publications, village development, history, and museums (Karpas 60). The drama committee staged the plays that were approved by the Republican Party. On the first anniversary of the People’s Houses, politician Necip Ali Küçük stated that the theatre was “one of the most powerful tools of expressing the values and sensations of the revolution” (qtd. in And, *50 Yılın Türk* 65). They estimated that in about two days, they could spread a message through theatre to more than one hundred thousand people in 136 different People’s Houses (Yeşilkaya 115). According to Nurhan Karadağ, People’s Houses staged more than 3,000 plays in 1939, about 2,000 in 1940, and 3,000 in 1944 (113-14). During the period from 1927 to 1994, the number of plays written by Turkish playwrights was the highest between 1931 and 1946 (Nutku 79). Despite the numbers, however, the plays written during this period were quickly forgotten due to their poor literary quality. Levent Boyacıoğlu makes a similar evaluation:

Since they had no literary value after the first wave of excitement and after the Democrat Party rose to power, these plays lost their function and currency. It is striking that they were literarily plain, primitive in regards to plot and meager in terms of language.

They stand out with their literary weakness and give the impression that they were all written by the same writer. Thus they take their place as the most tasteless and unappealing works in the history of Turkish literature. (30)

The literary value of the plays was not a major concern for the ruling elite during this period. What was eminent for them was how much these plays had an impact on the public. Eyal Ari claims that, despite the efforts, the drama committee of the People's Houses did not have any meaningful influence:

Despite the stated desire to use the theatre as a vehicle for disseminating the party's ideals among the villagers, it seems that it did not ultimately play a major role in this sector of the population. Although this was no doubt due to physical constraints, mainly lack of resources, and the difficulty of reaching the vast number of widely dispersed villages, as well as the representatives' condescending attitude, . . . the party was fearful of implanting a political consciousness among the villagers. Generally, this last reason is manifested by the tight control of the party, via the people's Rooms, over any attempt of the villagers to initiate independent cultural activities, and more specific to this study, by the limited scope of theatrical activity in the villages. In the end, most of the Houses' theatrical activity was concentrated in the urban centers and targeted the urban crowds. Thus, despite popular rhetoric, the theatre during the first republican period remained a predominantly urban experience. (53)

The constraints Ari names are valid, and although the exact influence that the theatre had on the population cannot be determined, it would not be just to say it had no effect at all. The theatre was not the sole agent but a part of a complicated process in constructing a new nation. Many reforms were introduced to bring about the shift from a religious community to a western-type secular nation, and the theater had a crucial function in service of the state during that period. It served the need to create a new collective identity. As demonstrated, the Turkish History Thesis

was constructed in order to cut ties with the Ottoman past and find new roots in pre-Islamic times. Over the years, the extreme assertions of the Turkish History Thesis were abandoned, but its fragments continued to be cultivated by the ruling governments in accordance with national and international developments. The “focus on the ethnic origins of national identity in the mythical motherland of central Asia persisted,” but this was “no longer traced back to times immemorial” (Keyman and Kancı 326). The love of the country and “sacrificing lives to protect the homeland, the nation and, its symbols was not only a duty but in fact the defining feature of being a Turk” (Keyman and Kancı 327). Over time, various tools were used to impose these slightly transformed narratives to the new generation, but the initial agent which rooted them in the 1930s to a mostly illiterate society was theatre.

Many critics argue that urging the theatre to serve as a state ideological apparatus immensely prevented its advancement in Turkey. In terms of the plays staged in People’s Houses, Karadağ states that if the government had “fused propaganda with the magical power of art” (201), the state of the Turkish theatre today could have been much more advanced. This and similar assertions have little basis in reality. We are talking about a country that has been through years of war and devastation with almost no background in Western theatre.⁷ The creation of an inspirational theatre through the ruling government during such a period of stark transformation was impossible. Governments can support the arts, but expecting such a great outcome, as Karadağ states, is against the nature of art itself. Creativity does not emerge with force; it arises from within and finds its natural course with time. Accordingly, it was mostly during the 1960s that inspirational works in theatre began to flourish in Turkey. Its journey from then on has not been easy, but it has definitely been a unique one.

Notes:

¹ The first principle, Republicanism, recognizes a Republican regime for the nation. Kemalist nationalism meant that every individual within the

borders of Turkey is to be recognized as a Turk, regardless of ethnicity, religion, and gender. One's Turkishness is determined by "the degree a person associates himself with the ideals and goals of the Turkish Republic and through commitment to Turkey's independence and modernization" (Kili 388). Populism aimed for a more classless society. It "recognized no special privileges for any individual . . . and envisaged a social system based on work and emphasized national unity both for national security and development" (Kili 389). Statism referred to the state intervention into the economic activity in certain areas where the private enterprise "was not willing to be involved, or in which the private enterprise had proven to be inadequate or if national interest required it" (Kili 391). Kemalist secularism did not only mean the separation of state and religion. It was a great struggle to "free state institutions, juridical structure, the educational system, and society in general from the influence of men of religion" (Dumont 36). Revolutionism meant "a transformation in outlook, the adoption of western ways of life, a fight against ignorance and superstition, the import of new techniques, economic development and, in particular, a constant resort to science" (Dumont 34-35).

² Surnames were not adopted in Turkey until 1934. Before this date, scholars published under their first names. In the Works Cited list, after the name of the author Afet, "İnan," is given in brackets since she adopted this surname after the publication of the book.

³ İbrahim Kafesoğlu names sixteen similarities between Islam and Shamanism.

⁴ Namık Kemal belonged to a political group called the Young Ottomans. These men were educated in Europe and were familiar with the European political systems. They argued that the empire would gain power only by constitutional representation and by various reforms. They were not against the monarchy, but they found the ruling sultan Abdülaziz inadequate (Mardin 10-14).

⁵ Because all subsequent quotations from the play *Akın* (*The Raid*) are taken from the same edition, only page numbers will be given henceforth.

⁶ Because all subsequent quotations from the play *Homeland* are taken from the same edition, only page numbers will be given henceforth.

⁷ During the Ottoman rule, there were traditional entertainment types such as Karagöz (shadow puppet play), orta oyunu, and meddah (storyteller). The Western theatre was introduced mostly with the Armenians' endeavor in the second half of the 19th century. Its emergence was mainly due to

the westernization process and not related to the society itself. The Western theatre, therefore, was an extremely new phenomenon in (or for) the Turkish Republic.

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