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In search of moral imagination that tells us “who the Kurds are”: Toward a new theoretical approach to modern Kurdish literature¹

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Abstract

The main objective of this article is to propose a new theoretical perspective on modern Kurdish literature in order to enrich the existing field, which has mainly focused on identity and social issues. This article refers to Kwame Appiah’s reflections on the ethics of identity and the concept of moral imagination by Martha Nussbaum, Patricia Werhane and Lawrence M. Hinman, and argues that the proposed moral imagination can have an important contribution to analysing Kurdish literature, deepening existing approaches and better evaluating Kurdish prose. It can also provide a greater insight into the difficult colonial and postcolonial interrelations.

Keywords: Contemporary Kurdish literature; identity; moral imagination; village guards

Li pey xeyaleke exlaqî ku dibêje me “kurd kî ne”: Ber bi nêrîneke teorîk a nû li ser edebiyata kurdî ya modêrn

Armanca serekî ya vê gotarê pêşkêşkirina nêrîneke nû ya mêtodolojîk e ji bo vekolîna edebiyata kurdî ya modêrn da ku xebatên heyî, ku bêtir bala xwe didin ser nasname û meseleyên civakî, dewlemendtir bike. Ev gotar xwe dispêre hizrên Kwame A. Appiah yê li ser etîka nasnameyê û têgeha texeyula exlaqî ya nivîskarên wek Martha Nussbaum, Patricia Werhane û Lawrence M. Hinman. Îdiya gotarê ew e ku ev têgeha “texeyula exlaqî” dikare beşdariyêke girîng bike di tehlîlkirina edebiyata kurdî de, lewre ew dikare nêrînen heyî kûrtir bike û rêyê li tehlîlên çêtir ên li ser pexşana kurdî veke. Herwiha ev têgeh dibe têgîhiştinên berfirehtir dabîn bike li ser têkiliyên aloz ên kolonyal û paş-kolonyal.

له ميانه‌ی گهران به دواى خه‌یالێكى نه‌خه‌لاییدا كه نهمان ده‌ئێ: كورد ده‌كان كێن؟؛ به‌ره‌و تێورا ئه‌ندێنێكى نوى بۆ نه‌ده‌بىاتى مۆدێرنى كوردیى ئامانجى سه‌ر ده‌كى نهم باسه‌ پێشنيار كردنى تێز و انیشتێكى مێتودۆلۆجیه‌ بۆ نه‌ده‌بى مۆدێرنى كوردی بۆ روشنكر نه‌مه‌وى نه‌و روشنى هه‌نووكه‌یه‌ی بوار كه‌، كه‌ بریتیه‌یه‌ له‌ تێشكسته‌نه‌ سه‌ر بابته‌ى ناسنامه‌ و بوی سه‌ر كۆمه‌لاه‌یه‌یه‌كان. باسه‌كه‌ ناماژه‌ به‌ هه‌لسه‌نگه‌ندانه‌كانى كواى. نه‌ی. ئاییاخ له‌سه‌ر نه‌خه‌لاییه‌یه‌ى ناسنامه‌ و هه‌ره‌ها مژا رابى خه‌یال كردنى ئاكار بیه‌یه‌ له‌ لای هه‌ر یه‌ك له‌ مارتا نوسباوم و پاتریشا وهره‌انه‌ و لورینز. ئێم. هینمان ده‌كان. باسه‌كه‌ گه‌نۆ گۆی نه‌ده‌كان كه‌ پێشنياری خه‌یال كردنى ئاكار بیه‌یه‌ ده‌توانن به‌مه‌دار بیه‌ی گه‌رنگى هه‌یه‌یت له‌ شه‌رۆقه‌ كردنى نه‌ده‌بىاتى كوردیدا. ده‌توانیت تێگه‌شتنه‌ هه‌نووكه‌یه‌یه‌كان قوولتر بکاتمه‌وه‌ بیه‌یه‌ مايه‌ی هه‌لسه‌نگه‌ندانێكى بابته‌یه‌یه‌مه‌تر. له‌مه‌ش زیاتر، ده‌توانن دنیا بیه‌یه‌یه‌ی مهن‌نر بده‌ته‌ شه‌رۆقه‌كار له‌ ميانه‌ی تێگه‌شتن له‌ په‌یوه‌نده‌یه‌ ناڵۆز ده‌كانى سه‌رده‌مى كۆلۆنیاى و پاش كۆلۆنیاى سه‌بارت به‌ نه‌ده‌بى كوردی.

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“Literary form is not separable from philosophical content, but is itself a part of content – an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth.”

Martha C. Nussbaum

“It is to give up certainty but not the search for truth.”

Elisabeth Gerle

Introduction

The title of this article refers to a well-known text by the Kurdish literary scholar Hashem Ahmedzadeh entitled “In search of a Kurdish novel that tells us who the Kurds are”. There are a few reasons for borrowing his title. Firstly, the subject of this article relates to the identity issues undertaken by Ahmedzadeh in many of his works, including the above mentioned paper. Secondly, this article wishes to promote continuity in Kurdish literary studies, which to my mind should be focused on enriching and supporting what has already been achieved. That is why I decided to modify his title and not invent a completely new one. Moreover, the title best suits the aim of this article, which aims to show that, considering the moral and philosophical reflection offered by contemporary Kurdish literature, we can better understand *who the Kurds are*², that is to refine the discussion on Kurdish identity. In addition, the ethical reflection fits with the postcolonial perspective and aids us in following the difficult relationship between the Turks and the Kurds. A further aim of this article is to expose the value of questions and doubts in both our everyday judgments and literary interpretations. This article consists of two sections; the first, entitled “Moral imagination and postcolonial reckoning” introduces the term of moral imagination, linking it with postcolonial studies. The second, “When a dog becomes a cat”, -applies the discussed perspective to analyse a short story by Hesenê Metê³ entitled “Şepal”.

The ethical dimension of Kurdish literature is an inseparable part of Kurdish identity disputes, which dominate Kurdish literary studies, because as shown by Kwame Anthony Appiah, old ethical problems still play an important part in our understanding of *who we are*, simply because they cannot be separated from

² In this article the question of “who we are” does not reflect an essentialist viewpoint, but rather points to the question of identity that Ahmedzadeh brings up. Any answer to this question individualises the subject, in the same way as other abstract values such as love or hate need to be individualised. By using this phrase I also refer to Appiah who links the question of “who we are” to moral questions such as what we owe to others.

³ Hesenê Metê, born in 1957 in Erxanî in the northern part of Kurdistan, is a contemporary writer based in Sweden. He writes in the Kurmanji dialect of Kurdish. Hesenê Metê is the author of short stories published in collections entitled *Smirnoff* (1991), *Epilog* (1998), and *Îsev* (Today’s Evening, 2009), and novels *Labîrenta Cinan* (The Labyrinth of Djinn, 1994), *Tofan* (Storm, 2000), *Gotinên gunehkar* (Sinful stories, 2007) and *Lî derê* (In the church, 2011). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are my own.

the question of *what we owe to others* (2010: xiii/xiv). According to Appiah (2005: xiv), identity is a modern term applied to conceptualise issues which are not entirely new, but have been taken into account in a philosophical way in the past. He (2005: 24) regards identity as the source of many important ethical values because recognising something as important is often related to our identity. Identity helps us to make choices and find our way through life, evokes solidarity with people of the shared identity and involves collective intentions in our projects and commitments (p. 24). This suggests that when reflecting on identity our attention must be directed to both the social and cultural contexts we live in and to the deeds and inner life where our moral choices are made. Literature and the moral imagination evoked by reading are some of the best instruments to exemplify and understand the processes by which moral choices are made. As stressed by Lawrence M. Hinman (2007: 17), “an imagination, whether through direct contact or through literature and the arts, provides us with access to the inner life of the other, and it is precisely this access which is the foundation of the moral life”.

The approaches to modern Kurdish literature that dominate the field of Kurdish literary criticism have been developed by scholars such as Hashem Ahmedzadeh, Özlem Belçim-Galip and Clemence Scalbert-Yücel, who have made important contributions to Kurdish identity and literary studies. However, due to the scarcity of translations of Kurdish literary texts into foreign languages, their works very much represent Kurdish literature outside of the Kurdish speaking world. The main aim of the abovementioned authors has been to present the wider social context in which Kurdish literature emerged and depict the social context contained within the literary texts. That is why I will refer to this perspective as “social”. Ahmedzadeh, Belçim-Galip and Scalbert-Yücel explore many topics and motifs, and such an overview is essential for understanding the historical, political and cultural context of literature, but as put forward in this article, without good insight into the characters’ inner lives, thoughts, emotions and moral choices, we will not be able to see all the elements of “the Kurdish puzzle”. Ahmedzadeh (2003, 2005, 2013), for example, is primarily focused on identity and various aesthetical issues. In his works he presents a close connection between the process of nation-building and the emergence of the novel in the Persian and Kurdish contexts (2003). Furthermore, he (2011, 2014) provides us with an overview of modern Kurdish literary aesthetics, such as realism, naturalism and magic realism, which is an important contribution to Kurdish literary and modernity studies. However, although we can find summaries of novels and short stories in his works, they never offer us a more thorough analysis of actions, thoughts and feelings of the characters. For example, when Ahmedzadeh (2003) describes the plot of *Gulî Şoran* (The Flower of Shoran), a novel by Eta Nehaye, in discussing the protagonist he states: “We read his thoughts when he enters the city late in the evening” (p. 257) or: “the inner thoughts of the characters are well depicted through their monologues” (p. 258). However, we have no

opportunity to learn more about these thoughts and how exactly they are portrayed. The choice of the scholar to shorten the descriptions of novels and its characters is justified by the applied perspective that follows Benedict Anderson's theory and focuses on how Kurdish literature contributed to the process of forming and cementing the *imagined community* of the Kurdish nation (2003: 16). Thus, the priority has been to analyse many literary texts and a variety of motifs ranging from the characters to macro scale topics reflected in the novels, such as historical events (2003: 261) or religious customs (2003: 264). Belçim-Galip (2015, 2014) focuses on the image of Kurdistan in modern Kurdish literature and on the collective memory and diaspora, whilst Clemence Scalbert-Yücel (2012, 2014) reflects on minority literatures and resistance, but none of them expose any inner world, moral dilemmas or difficult choices faced by literary characters. Referring to the novel *Miyexî* (Exile) by Adil Zozan, Belçim-Galip (2015) discusses "the Turkish commander who regrets the cruel operations undertaken against guerrillas during his service in the Turkish army" (p. 139). Moreover, we learn that the commander's life changed after he had been affected by a story told by one of the Kurdish guerrillas while he was in captivity. To quote Belçim-Galip, "as soon as he is released, he gives up his job and, distressed and remorseful, begins to work as a lawyer" (p. 139). This is a very interesting ethical issue showing that moral choices can be inspired by narratives and by getting an insight to the inner life of others. However, this remains unexplored in the text and only briefly summarised. What Belçim-Galip highlights is that the Turkish ex-commander confirms "the existence of Kurdistan as a separate entity" (p. 139) which is "recognition of territory by another nation" (p. 140). In other words, in all of these works we only grasp a general view of the many characters and their ethical dilemmas. The characters are introduced, their dilemmas are sometimes mentioned but they are not explored in detail. That is because from the viewpoint of the social approach characters are important as a part of the larger *imagined community* of the Kurdish nation. Thus, the imagination and characters' inner lives, if at all, are viewed through their connections to Kurdistan, expressed as either a great love or yearning for the homeland (Belçim-Galip, 2015: 174-190).

Not undermining the role of the aforementioned social perspective, which provides us with a clear panoramic view of Kurdish literature, here I would like to focus on a more detailed approach to the inner lives of literary characters, their thoughts, feelings and moral choices which I consider to be the pillars of the moral imagination project. In order to provide a deeper insight into the ethical dimension of Kurdish literature, in the second part of this article I will analyse the short story, "Şepal" written by Hesenê Metê, which presents difficult moral dilemmas in an aesthetically valuable way. The writer successfully manages to describe a complicated moral plight in a very short text. He does so by applying sophisticated narrative techniques, metaphors and terse well-considered sentences, which is why this story is worthy of further attention. Moreover, "Şepal" tells the story of a Kurdish village guard, Demodin, and

raises difficult moral issues of faithfulness and betrayal in an aesthetical way. Thus, it has also potential to contribute to postcolonial studies with regards to Kurdish literature and to the difficult process of reconciliation between Turks and Kurds. By following Demodin, we not only observe Kurdish literature at a distance from the existing social approach, but also immerse ourselves in the psychological and philosophical dimensions of the characters' lives, dilemmas and choices. This analysis suits well the aim of this paper, which is to show moral choices as inseparable from identity. Additionally, the length of this concise short story allows us to analyse it thoroughly in this article.

Moral imagination and the postcolonial reckoning

Along with the domination of postmodern thought, the ethical approach to literature is frequently associated with boring or even dangerous didactics. Postmodern philosophers claim that the traditional morality that was based on essentialism, obligation and instruction is useless in our modern times (Shusterman, 1988: 338-343) and cannot be built into any convincing narration. The crisis of the ethical dimension of literary narratives gave birth to many interesting publications. The acclaimed *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Literature and Philosophy* by Martha Nussbaum (1990) is one such example. The term moral imagination has also been adopted by other American philosophers in order to point to a kind of moral consideration, which for Patricia Werhane (2009: 3) "includes an awareness of the various dimensions embedded in the particular situation." Lawrence M. Hinman (2007: 17) highlights that moral imagination answers a difficult challenge, which is not "whether to tell the truth, but how to do so. How to state difficult, potentially hurtful truths in the best possible way."

The history of the term of moral imagination dates back to the works of Scottish philosopher Adam Smith (1723-1790) as well as the Austrian thinker Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925), whose *Philosophy of Freedom* defines the concept. According to Steiner (2000: 61), imagination fills the gap between abstract ideas we have in our minds and observations we make by means of our senses: imagination becomes an individualised concept, which enriches our knowledge and experiences. According to Steiner's vision of a free man, each of his deeds should be motivated by the imagination-based consideration. It brings together abstract values we wish to follow and enables us to understand the reality we live in. In this way, we can choose the best possible option to act upon and assume responsibility for our deeds. To Steiner, ethics cannot be based exclusively on the norms and codes inherited from the past. Such a morality, which to him dominates people's minds, becomes a rigid rule that does not answer the necessity of deep ethical thinking. That is why it should be transformed by means of moral imagination (p. 61). As we will see in the following section, Hesenê Metê's protagonist, Demodin, intuitively tries to bring together the values he wishes to follow and his own experiences in order to make decisions in life. He adjusts the moral teaching inherited from the old

Kurd he respected to a difficult reality in which such lessons seem futile. He does not comply with rigid rules but follows his moral imagination, which is revealed to us through his monologues and conversations with other characters. Although Demodin's choices raise much controversy, the story indicates that his decisions are more complex than a simple desire to deceive or betray others. Furthermore, *Hesenê Metê* shows what it means to be a Kurd under the harsh regime of the Turkish state, and reveals the tragic perplexity hidden under the label "traitor", which was often applied to the so-called village guards by the Kurds. This helps us both to individualise and reconsider the negative label of traitor and to link ethics to identity in the framework offered by Appiah (2005, 2010), evaluating identity as a possible source of ethical values and moral choices. Reading the story, we can also imagine how difficult it was to make decisions in such tragic circumstances.

In search of arguments in favour of literary moral imagination, Nussbaum came back to ancient Greek philosophy. For her (1990), literature can be useful in moral thinking thanks to its specifics which "gives a certain type of priority to the perception of particular people and situations, rather than to abstract rules" (p. ix). Primarily, she focuses on a noncommensurability of valuable things, which is so well exposed by the qualitative basis of literary texts, rather than the quantitative perspective which dominates in many other sciences. In other words, by means of literature, we can understand the difficulty of making choices, which very often have to be made between two different incomparable values (pp. 106-124). We cannot just measure them in one general and hierarchical scale. This is well exemplified in *Hesenê Metê*'s short story where characters are forced to live in a reality dominated by ideologies and violence from both Turkish and Kurdish sides. This leads to tragic paradoxes, when choices must be made between completely incomparable values. Although nationalist ideology often claims that the life of a single human should be sacrificed for the sake of a nation, this may and should be questioned by showing the paradoxes it implies. As we can learn from the many ongoing conflicts, people often sacrifice their lives for the sake of their nations because of the difficult conditions they are forced to live in. It happens especially when they feel endangered as members of a group or a nation. From the short story "Şepal" we learn that the family of one of the Kurdish characters, Sadûn, was killed by the guerrillas. Living in a very insecure environment Sadûn is forced to choose his protectors, but he has only two options: the Turkish soldiers or the Kurdish guerrillas, which either way would be a tragic choice. Sadûn cannot simply decide that the lives of his relatives are less or more important than the idea of Kurdishness in the name of which his family was killed. These values do not belong to one hierarchical scale and cannot be measured thus. Sadûn decides to abandon the "Kurdish camp" represented by the guerrillas and reluctantly makes favour with the Turks being persuaded by his companion, Demodin.

Additionally, Martha Nussbaum (1990: 66) refers to the priority of perception of perceiving the particular. The skill, so important for valuable reasoning, can be deepened and developed by literature, which presents many inner and external contexts embedded in particular situations. In other words, the literary narration provides us with a zoom by which we can see the unfolding reality depicted in the short story or novel. Such a presentation is planned by a writer who guides us to his view of a particular world. By following him we can acquire skills to perceive the particular and train our attention on the reality presented, which does not of course mean that we have to surrender to the writer's vision. It still depends on the reader which elements of the literary world he will appreciate. Consequently, the second part of this article will offer a thorough reading of the story, which will give priority to many details that would not usually be given due consideration by the social approach. Thus, the analysis will focus on the many inner and external contexts embedded in the reality of a Kurdish village and its inhabitants.

What is crucial is the more attention that is paid to the various contexts embedded in a particular situation, the more the literary practice of moral imagination allies with the postcolonial process of recalling and reconsidering the ambiguous relationship between the coloniser and the colonised. The validity of such a process for postcolonial studies and reconciliation was stressed by several thinkers (Gandhi, 2008: 18). Memmi (1968:45), highlighted that colonialism will only disappear if the coloniser and the colonised are willing to see the reciprocal nature of their difficult relationship and responsibility. This is well exposed in Hesenê Metê's story through his depiction of the relationship between Demodin and the Turkish sergeant as well as his outspoken question on Kurdish responsibility within the conflict.

Another advantage of literature, which is emphasised by Nussbaum, is its emotional aspect. Although, since antiquity, art has often been excluded from serious thought precisely because of this aspect, Nussbaum regards it as an asset and not a liability. She (1990: 41) claims that "emotions are closely linked to beliefs in such a way that the modification of beliefs brings about the modification of emotions." Moreover, to be overcome by emotions does not necessarily mean losing contact with reality, but may also mean discovering reality by another tool set (p. 261). In other words, the sympathy we get (or lose) for the character we read about is always based on our beliefs, which can be modified or at least reconsidered by the process of reading. Needless to say, it can change our attitude in many aspects to the surrounding world. Thus, emotions engaged in reading become an important cognitive tool and must be treated with due respect. The above is gracefully demonstrated in the story. After reading it, we cannot simply call Demodin a traitor and condemn him for his alliance with the Turkish soldiers. Thanks to empathy evoked by the characters' emotions exposed in the story, we try to understand the traitor, and this is where the power of moral imagination is hidden. Recalling the quotation from Elisabeth Gerle (2003), at the beginning of this article: "we give up

certainty” of our judgements “but not the search for truth” (p. 35). On the other hand, Nussbaum (1990: 262) highlights the role of literary texts which provide us with both an emotional zoom and intellectual distance to the described reality and Hesênê Metê achieves this by using two different kinds of narration, which I will analyse in the following section.

Finally, Nussbaum (1990) stresses that literature and moral considerations are linked by one important question derived from Plato, which is *how one should live*. Because “What we really want is an account of an ethical inquiry that will capture what we actually do when we ask ourselves the most pressing ethical questions” (p. 24). In this way, literature is not a recipe for achieving the answers we need in each ethical consideration, but rather a set of questions that can or should be asked in regard to the reality we live in. This allows us to select texts which provide us with answers or questions. The first one is a typical didactic or ideology-based literature, which rarely meets our ethical needs. The second one is created from doubts and considerations, and coincidentally pays much more attention to the aesthetical dimension. It is thanks to the aesthetic means that ethical questions of literature become more sublime and apt. If we look at the history of modern Kurdish literature, we can describe it as a constant departure from the ideological and political device of portraying reality to a more sensitive perception and description of it. While the first modern Kurdish writers (such as Rehim Qazi or Ibrahim Ahmed) were active in the political field (Ahmedzadeh, 2003: 173-175), many contemporary writers (Hesênê Metê, Sherzad Hessen among others) are keen to declare their independence from ideology or politics. This does not mean that political or national reality is absent in their works: on the contrary, contemporary prose can be a valuable commentary to it. However, the works constantly become more and more multidimensional, embedding new contexts to the presented situations and this is one of the most important achievements of the Kurdish literary field of the last decades. Following Nussbaum, the analysis which proceeds gives priority to questions too, which aims to stress the value and importance of uncertainty, contrary to fixed and permanent views and firm convictions we constantly produce in order to deal with and make sense of, order and judge the reality around us.

When a dog becomes a cat

“Şepal”⁴ tells the story of Demodin, who is a *korucu*, i.e. a Kurdish village guard working for the Turkish state against other Kurds. Şepal is Demodin's dog, which becomes a meaningful pretext to tell the story of conquest, subordination, betrayal, faithfulness and human dignity. The analysis of its

⁴ The story was published in the collection entitled *Îşev* (2009), by Apec Förlag, Stockholm, pp. 37-45. All the quotations in this article come from that edition. I also translated this story into Polish and it was published as Szepal in the second online issue of *Fritillaria Kurdica. Bulletin of Kurdish Studies* (Metê, 2012).

content will help us see that identity issues are inseparable from moral questions.

Korucu (or *qoriçi* in Kurdish) is the Turkish word that comes from the verb *korumak*, which means to guard/protect. The system of *korucus* was established by the Republic of Turkey in Kurdistan in the 1980s (Yildiz, 2005: 17). This was a well-known tactic used to infiltrate the region and govern people through a “divide and rule” policy without mass engagement of state resources. To some extent, it can be compared to the so-called dark blue police or *Polnische Polizei* created by Nazi Germany in occupied Poland. But in the case of *korucu*, not only individuals but also families and clans were engaged in supporting the state against the rebels. *Korucus* were and continue to be seen as traitors by many members of the Kurdish community, who did not accept such an alliance with the Turkish state. Nevertheless, the reasons for joining the *korucus* were very diverse and Hesenê Metê indicates them in his short story. He does it in an allusive form which reminds us of his inspiration from Anton Chekhov’s style, where the meaning is rather hidden between the lines than directly exposed. By a few well considered short sentences he manages to tell volumes about the contradictions of human nature.

The short story uses a complicated mixed form of narration, which makes us see the world through Demodin’s eyes and from a distance of a third-person narrative mode. The third-person narrative is in the present tense, which can be compared to a play. The events seem both exhibited and talked about. Thanks to the first-person narrative mode, we are submerged in reality and follow Demodin’s emotions and point of view and, by means of the play-shaped style narration, we find ourselves far away, somewhere outside “the stage”, where the events are taking place. In other words, we simultaneously come closer to and keep a distance from reality.

As mentioned above, the eponymous *Şepal* is the name of Demodin’s dog. It is used as a meaningful metaphor since the dog itself is not playing any important role in events. Nevertheless, it becomes a crucial factor for the essence of this literary text. *Şepal* can be included in the family of famous literary dogs and be compared with Sharik from “The Heart of a Dog” by the Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov (1925). Bulgakov used the motif of a dog to recount the gruesome reality of the Soviet regime as does Hesenê Metê, when exploring the reality of the Turkish regime in the 1980s. *Şepal* finally escapes but is caught and killed. The dog’s connection to Demodin is visible from the very beginning and he becomes representative of his owner’s hidden desires and inner thoughts.

Şepal’s name (which means a brave dog), carries a metaphorical meaning. On the one hand, it is a very popular name for dogs in Kurdistan, so perhaps not remarkable. However, another meaning of *Şepal* is panther or lion, which are from the Feline rather than the Canine family. Although, seemingly of minor importance, it becomes crucial when viewed through the context of two contradictory and even competing identities, not only of dog and cat but also

of Kurds and Turks. In other words, we can ask what the reason for a dog becoming a cat is? What is the underlying meaning of a dog being called by a cat's name in the story? Through this meaningful metaphor we are invited to approach and consider the ambiguous relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, its psychological and moral complexity. As we will see below, this motif is further strengthened and developed in the story.

The story starts late in the evening when Şepal's barking disturbs Demodin's wife. The plot is initially exposed by the play narrative mode, which quickly switches to the first person narrative. During the evening conversation between Demodin and his wife, Mehnaz, we are told about the events that took place in the near and more distant past. Then the play narration refers briefly to the events that followed, which brings the end to the story.

Demodin explains to his wife that Şepal is displaying his brave spirit, which comes from lions and tigers. He emphasises the value of his words by saying that they are not only his, but also "Durmîş efendi's words" (p. 37). We learn that Durmîş efendi is a sergeant at the nearby Turkish military base that Demodin works for.⁵ His respectful use of the title *Durmîş efendi*⁶ is even adopted when he speaks with his wife at home (pp. 37-38). Thus, it expresses admiration rather than fear or subordination. The Turkish sergeant, who came from a far and unknown world outside of the village, becomes a father figure for Demodin. In one of the final sentences of the story Demodin even calls him Qaşo (p. 44), which is the Kurdish diminutive of the Turkish name Durmuş.⁷ It highlights that, in fact, Demodin strongly desires to fraternise with the sergeant and manages to do so to some extent. Demodin tells his wife how he offered his brave dog to work with the sergeant. He asks Durmîş efendi to set a salary for Şepal, because of his unique skills to hunt guerrillas.⁸ The sergeant smiles and tells Demodin that the state (i.e. Turkish state) does not allow any salaries to be paid to dogs, stressing that such things could not even happen during the Ottoman times. Instead, he suggests buying the dog but Demodin refuses saying that, despite being clever, Turkish officials do not know anything about taking care of a dog. The dog cannot be sold to the Turks

⁵ It is not clear what kind of base it is, the army or gendarme. Still, there are three kinds of security forces in Turkey: police, gendarme and the army.

⁶ In Turkey the word "effendi" is used as a respectful form that can be translated into English as "Mr."

⁷ Throughout the text I use the Kurdish spelling of the Turkish word "Durmuş" which is "Durmîş".

⁸ Because of the leftist ideology and comparisons to the South American leftist revolutionary movements, the Kurdish rebels from Kurdistan Workers' Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, PKK) often call themselves *guerrillas* (*gerîla*) and are referred to as such by their supporters. It is interesting that Demodin uses this eponym narrating his talk to the sergeant because such a word could hardly have been used by the Turkish sergeant. *Gerîla* is an eponym of respect and Turkish officials would never use it referring to PKK fighters. But narrating the story to his wife, Demodin puts it into Durmîş efendi's mouth. This is also one of the writer's methods to make Demodin's character more ambiguous and rich.

because “by eating the bread from the military base it will become a bastard.”⁹ Thus, setting a salary for the dog while it remains resident in Demodin’s home is a better solution (pp. 39-40). This brief conversation holds many important hidden meanings. Obviously, we see Demodin’s witty wish to get a salary for the dog, but on the other hand, what he is saying is in fact an insult to the Turkish officials, who, in spite of their power and knowledge, can only raise bastards. Thus, these words inescapably suggest that the Turkish officials are morally corrupted and stupid. The sergeant is unable to grasp the meaning of Demodin’s words because of the light hearted atmosphere of their conversation. But are Demodin’s words conscious or subconscious? Is he talking about the dog or about himself? Does he realise the ironic absurdity of the situation? Though his outward approach to Durmîş efendi suggests that Demodin wishes to fraternise with the Turks, these words imply that there is still a kind of hidden distance and aversion between Demodin and the Turkish state that the sergeant represents. This renders the literary characteristic of the main personage as more rich and sophisticated and helps us to imagine the ambiguous attitude Demodin has toward the sergeant which consists of both friendly feelings and aversion.

Sadûn, who has been silent up till now, comes to Demodin. Sadûn is his Kurdish companion who also works for the Turks as a village guard. He tells Demodin not to debase himself, by which we can suppose he means Demodin’s conversation with the sergeant and his plan to obtain a salary for his dog. This episode is also narrated by Demodin. Sadûn says that Demodin’s words are the real debasement and if “someone is not a villain he will never bow his head before villains.”¹⁰ This indirect accusation sounds serious to Demodin, who wishes to discuss it with his wife Mehnaz. She points out that Sadûn has no right to say so because he also joined the Turks as a village guard. Unexpectedly, Demodin opposes her by confessing that it was not Sadûn’s idea to join them but that he had convinced him to do that because “no good will come of Sadûn’s wandering with a gun in hand” (p. 41). We can extract more information from this small excerpt. Firstly, through Demodin’s feeling of responsibility for persuading Sadûn to join the Turks, we understand that a relationship with the Turks is not highly valued by Demodin, although he himself identifies with them. He likes the sergeant and wants Sadûn to get to know Durmîş efendi, but at the same time, he also seems distanced toward them. Secondly, we see that Demodin only has good intentions. He knows well that in reality the patronage that sustains them is very important, and a man alone with a gun can soon bring problems upon his own head. Furthermore, we acknowledge that Sadûn might have had his own important reason for joining the Turks. Demodin tells Mehnaz about Sadûn’s family tragedy. Sadûn’s

⁹ I provide the original quotation: “(...) bi nanê qereqolan kûçik çênabin. Nanê qereqolan kûçikan dike bênamûs û hew” (p. 39).

¹⁰ “Belê, rasterast ev rezîlî ye û ne tiştêkî din, Demodin!...Û ku meriv ne rezîl be, meriv dest û devê xwe li ber van rezîlan xwar nake!” (p. 40).

mountain *zoma* (pastures inhabited by the Kurdish shepherds during the summer) have been frequently visited by Kurdish guerrillas, who the villagers fed and sheltered. One day, Sadûn's father (Sofi Sêvdîn), who was widely respected for his wisdom (as stressed by Demodîn), was accused by the guerrillas of inviting a Turkish officer and some soldiers into his tent. Sofi Sêvdîn confessed that he did so because it was their Kurdish duty to offer food even to an enemy (p. 42). According to Sofi Sêvdîn, being a Kurd requires behaving in this way.¹¹ However, the guerrillas respond by saying that times have changed and what he did was a treachery. Hearing the word traitor, Sadûn spits at the guerrillas and they retaliate by throwing a grenade into the tent and killing his family.¹² Sadûn, loses an eye in the explosion. Afterwards, he equips himself with a gun in order to defend himself against the guerrillas (pp. 42-43). The story is narrated by many agents (Demodîn says that Sadûn has said that Sofi Sêvdîn had said...), which is typical for folklore and religious tradition exhibited mainly in the stories devoted to the Prophet Muhammad. We cannot be sure if the presented events happened exactly in this way. Hesenê Metê adapts this traditional narrative mode to describe his personages and justify their moral choices. In such a style he traces the way in which they learn about the reality. In both Sofi Sêvdîn's and the guerrillas' statements we see the strong relevance of Appiah's connection between ethics and identity. Although understood differently, Kurdishness is linked to the notion of rightful choices. In the first case, it is *the feeding of enemies*, which is of course linked to the traditional duty of hospitality, in the second, *fighting with them*. Hence, to understand the perplexity of the situation, we need to see other elements of the puzzle. Sadûn should, according to the traditional code of rules, take revenge for the killing of his family. However, can he revolt against the guerrillas, that is, those who declare that they will protect the villagers from the enemy and liberate their country? What approach should he apply on his enemies? The one inherited from his father or the one suggested by the guerrillas? Even Sadûn confesses that the only thing he wants is not to avenge but to defend himself. Demodîn wishes to help him by securing the patronage of the competing faction, the Turks. But, is it all so simple? Can they ally with the Turks without doubts or consideration? Observing Demodîn's plan to get a salary for his dog,

¹¹ "Min ji bo we, ji bo xwe...gotiye, min ji bona me hemûyan nan û av daye ber wan, ma em ne Kurd in? Berbora bav û kalan e ku em li ser kulavê xwe mêvanan bi nan û av bikin...ku dijmin be jî" (p. 42).

¹² Because of this scene, the story was criticised by many Kurdish readers I know, complaining that it is not showing the Kurdish struggle in an adequate light. I will argue, however, that Hesenê Metê's critique is not of a political kind. It is not against or in favour of Kurdish village guards, the PKK or even the Turkish state. The story exposes the extreme emotions people are prone to precisely because of the Turkish army presence. The writer courageously asks for Kurdish responsibility, but does not justify Turks or their military presence. Hesenê Metê's lack of information about them can be compared to Ehmedê Khani's meaningful silence on the fate of Mîr Zeydîn in the final part of the Kurdish classic poem *Mem and Zîn*. Although its form is allusive, this silence speaks louder than words.

Sadûn opposes him by suggesting that what he wishes to do is typical for a villain who cowers down to another villain. Sadûn, similarly to guerrillas, takes the position of the one who places judgement. Yet, his anger emphasises that it is not easy to judge his fellow man, being in alliance with the Turks at the same time. From a distance, the reasons for becoming a Turkish servant lose their poignancy and become a simple fact to be established and judged by others. Narrating the story to his wife, Demodin feels compelled to share it with someone. It may mean that he does not feel comfortable about what happened. The events he narrates and his attention towards the surrounding reality, which is well proven by his approach to Sadûn, suggest that he is, in fact, a thoughtful and caring person, but ultimately, he is unsure of what he should do.

A very interesting motif is Sadûn's father's definition of being a Kurd, which is linked to ethical choices and, as stressed above, illustrates the validity of Appiah's idea. We see a mountainous village that consists of tents and people attached to tradition. Can the loss of one's family be compared to the lack of a country's independence? They cannot be measured by one scale of values. The noncomensurability of these two values in such a context makes people's choices a tragedy. Furthermore, this small episode emphasises another issue. Sofi Sêvdîn purports the role of tradition in understanding Kurdish identity, whilst the guerrillas claim that *the times have changed*, so what had previously been perceived as good cannot be seen as such anymore. Sofi seeks a solution in the old customs, highlighting the continuity of tradition and identity. The guerrillas wish to cut links with the past and only believe in their own wisdom and new, we can assume, radical solutions. But, is the old tradition sufficient in understanding more sophisticated threats of the modern Turkish state? And can the guerrillas win by disassociating from tradition and proclaiming a new war ethics? As stressed above, it is also a conflict of two competitive visions of Kurdishness and of how one should live in such a difficult reality. Both are hard-line approaches, thus it is useful to ask if there is any appropriate narration which can link the moral imagination of an old shepherd and a young guerrilla. Hesenê Metê's story invents such a narration. Demodin presents different contexts embedded in the situation and becomes the attentive listener to both traditional and contemporary ideas of how to deal with the Turkish military presence.

According to Steve Brie and William T. Rossiter (2010), literature may be a kind of up-dating practice leading to the understanding of different ethical codes, people, generations and conditions they live in. A literary up-dating method is based not only on narration but also on intertextuality, which forces old motifs and characters to speak in a new, more understandable way. Such a

practice is also visible in other works by Hesenê Metê, where he applies Yezidi or classical Kurdish literary motifs or personages.¹³

The section which follows Demodin's conversation with his wife adapts a play narration again. We learn that Şepal escapes from the village and afterwards his body is found hanging in Demodin's garden along with the note that next time it will be his owner. Simultaneously, someone sets fire to the school near the Turkish military barracks. It is not known who the culprit is, the reader may just assume that it was Sadûn. We do not know if Sadûn joined the guerrillas or if he is acting alone. As a result, Demodin is arrested by the soldiers and is suspected of arson (pp. 43-45). Despite the close relationship between him and sergeant Durmîş, Demodin cannot be trusted by the Turks nor be a part of them. Praised so much at the beginning, Şepal now becomes (in Demodin's description) the main responsible figure for all the bad things that have happened. Being until now a symbol of faithfulness, Şepal comes to symbolise betrayal. So does his owner in the eyes of the Turks. Şepal could not become the tiger. Theatrical narration, in addition to different descriptions of the dog, are significant elements linking the end with the beginning of the story. Demodin is not the hero type, but just an average guy, who wishes to be financially secure, calm and happy with his wife. But in his conversation with the sergeant, Demodin seems to be frank and courageous enough to be a hero. Contrary to Sadûn or the guerrillas, Demodin tries not to judge anyone. At the same time, he is naïve in his belief that he merits the trust and friendship of the Turkish soldiers. Is Demodin just unwise, then? Or, maybe what he really wants is to cheat them? It just might be so that the metaphor of dog and cat refers not to the other identity of these creatures but to their other symbolic features. Isn't the behaviour of a smart cat a better tactic in a situation demanding contact rather than fighting with the enemy? In a changed reality, being as faithful as a dog may just mean losing dignity. So, who is Demodin? Is he a traitor or rather a follower of Sofî Sêvdîn's definition of a Kurd, who simply wants to be a good man and does not even want to kill his enemies? But perhaps following the guerrillas' insistence that *times have changed*, he also wishes to resist the Turks by applying smartness rather than violence, however, we cannot be sure of that. Hesenê Metê's character adequately shows that courage and fear, as well as faithfulness and betrayal, smartness and foolishness may be inseparable from each other in one human being, who seemingly cannot be simply classified as a hero or traitor. The dog, which is now blamed for being unfaithful and

¹³ In his novel *Tofan* Hesenê Metê revived Beko (or Bekir), the notorious character from the legend of *Meme Alan* and Ehmedê Khani's *Mem and Zîn*. In both stories Beko served as a symbol of the worst kind of villain. However, the writer showed that ordinary people may be worse than Beko, whose name they constantly apply to stigmatise or exclude others. Following Ehmedê Khani, Bekir may be considered more than just a bad character. It can be perceived as Satan or the Yezidi *Tannusê Melek* personified. He is depicted as the source of good and of knowledge that is misunderstood by people. In other words, the tradition Hesenê Metê follows here indicates that "evil" must be explored and understood rather than simply condemned (Bocheńska, 2014: 146).

susceptible to passion, escapes from the village in a very meaningful way. He “disappears from people’s memory as a clumsy and unnecessary writer” (p. 43). The odd comparison suggests Şepal’s links not only to his owner but also to the author. The escape from the humiliating reality seems to be the only way to save dignity, but the solution is unavailable for the other characters. Thus, the story also becomes a symbolic reckoning with the writer’s past advocating for more attention and understanding in judging human deeds.

Conclusion

The analysis of this story shows us the difficult reality by emphasising the ethical problems of people who live in such circumstances. Of course, the usefulness of this story is not its literary meaning, but being written by a Kurd from Turkey, “Şepal” reflects the human plight in a very convincing, apt and aesthetically valuable form. Through detailed reading, our moral imagination becomes more sensitive to the problems which ordinarily are alien to us. Being familiar with such an intimate and particular situation, we become keener on exploring other related topics in a more attentive way. Moreover, the applied perspective provides us with a better insight in to the inner life of the characters, their dilemmas, feelings and choices, which are crucial for a fuller understanding of *who the Kurds are*. The Kurdish identity is closely related to the characters’ ethical choices because their understanding of identity very much preconditions such choices and a hierarchy of values. On the other hand, their choices can influence their identity because they often result in belonging to different competing groups such as the village guards and the guerrillas, the Turks and the Kurds. The old shepherd represents the attachment to tradition, guerrillas focus on the changing reality and Demodin wishes to mesh these two different systems of values. What links them together is the humiliating experience of the violent Turkish domination and the wish to overcome it with dignity. In spite of being labelled a traitor, in this short story the Kurdish village guard has the chance to speak and to be seen as a thoughtful and even a caring person. This does not of course mean that every Kurdish village guard was the same (we cannot even be sure about Demodin), but it urges us to be more critical and attentive in our judgments.

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