



SOCIETAL CONDITIONS OF THE PEASANTS IN THE STORIES OF SABAHATTIN ALI

Mehmet Devrim TOPSES*

Abstract

Since the socialist realist literature aims at reflecting the economical and class contradictions of the societal structure and the historical period that it emerged from, it is among the data collection sources of the social sciences. In this article, thirteen stories, which are about the societal structures of the peasants in the early Republic era, of Sabahattin Ali, who was among the representatives of socialist realism school, were analyzed. Based on the abovementioned stories, the objective of this article is to collect data concerning the societal conditions of the peasantry in the early Republic era. The obtained data were classified under four titles: 1. Peasants' struggle for life. 2. Gendarmery-Collector and Peasant relations. 3. Peasant and Intellectual Relations. 4. Peasants Feeling Societally Deceivedness. The data obtained include some indicators concerning the substantial basis of Turkish modernization in the Republic era.

Keywords: Literature Sociology, Societal Change, Socialist Realism, Turkish Modernization.

Introduction

Generally defined, the art is an activity based on esthetics concept. It is not the primary concern of art to be appropriate to facts, objects, actually to the reality. As in romanticism, art can be the product of human emotions, or it can also aim a complete break from the reality as seen in surrealism. The determining point of art is that it combines the discussed theme with aesthetics. As per socialist realism, it is the foundation of aesthetics on the basis of economic and class reality. This type of literature aims to understand the historical forces that determine the direction of development in a particular period of society, in other words, to understand the internal structure and dynamics of society (Moran, 2013, 55). So, socialist realistic literature has two main features. Firstly, it is the literary conception of the restrained or oppressed classes of society. Because, in a social structure, the masses, which need to explain reality and gather the attention of the whole society on class contradictions, are the oppressed classes. As the level of prosperity of the social groups increase, their commitment or need to reality is reduced. Second, socialist realism is the closest art concept through which sociology can reach to historical data. It is because it feeds on the societal observations of the author. The author's aim is not to describe any house, mountain, hill or stream, but to convey class contradictions in societal structure to the art. Therefore, Plehanov (1987, 9-11), who was among the first representatives of socialist realist literature, associated it to sociology.

It is possible to examine the Republican revolution with its class dimensions through detailed archival research and history readings that push the limits of the official history conception. Historical archives, however, are not enough to reveal the social structure of this period. The first of the distinguishing characteristics of Sabahattin Ali in Turkish literature is that he has given works of socialist realistic genre, while the second is that his works are transmitted through living, observing closely, or participating in social reality. Participating and observing without comment is the basis of cultural studies in social sciences. Such type of observation is impossible, when the researcher joining to the group from outside for a short time and explaining the purpose. It is only possible in cases, where the researcher is able to retain his/her observer identity or establish himself as a member of the group or community he/she observes (Sencer, 1984, 67). Ali, who taught in schools in Yozgat, Aydın, Konya, and Ankara during the single-party period, was able to observe the societal structure of this period by participation. He established close relations with the intellectuals and lived among the peasants. In addition, Sabahattin Ali was a literary scholar, who evaluated the single-party period apart from the official history conception and could direct criticism toward this period. His principle attitude towards observing the reality from objective point of view places him among the data collection sources of social scientists, who could prefer studying on the class dimensions of Turkish modernization.

* Assoc. Prof. Dr., Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Science and Letters, Department of Sociology.

1. Method

The most comprehensive review of the stories of Sabahattin Ali in our country was carried out by our great man of literature and researcher Asım Bezirci (Look: Bezirci, 1987). In this review, all of the stories and novels of Sabahattin Ali were classified and interpreted according to the societal contexts they discussed and concerning all of the societal segments. Unlike the work of Bezirci, the subject of our article is limited to the village stories of Sabahattin Ali. The reason, why the stories but not the novels of Sabahattin Ali are preferred, is that the village reality is discussed more in the stories than the novels. Workers are not in the subject of the article. It is because the stories of the author describing the workers are too few to make generalizations about the period. The intellectuals of the period are mostly analyzed in their relations with the peasants. In other words, if the stories of the author can be analyzed on a regular basis, some indicators of the intellectual typology of the period can be reached. The thirteen stories, which were written by Sabahattin Ali about the peasantry of the early Republic period and published in separate books, were examined in our article under four separate subheadings concerning their issues. These subtitles also give an idea about which reality of the village Ali focused on more.

2. Life Struggle of the Peasants

When a general title is sought, "Ayran (The Buttermilk)", "Yeni Dünya (The New World)", "Kanal (The Channel)", "Kağnı (The Tumbrel)", and "Köpek (The Dog)" stories refer to the life struggle of the Turkish peasants during the initial years and the single-party period of the Republic. When the stories are examined, the two concepts that could define the societal reality of the peasant class in that era, are observed to be the injustice and hunger. More than poverty, the peasants are in hunger in the story "Ayran". "Their heels are not on the heel of the shoe, but directly steps in the mud" (Ali, 1966, 50). A man calling The Little Hasan as "ulan" bought his ayran, which he even held out on his brothers and tried to sell in the train station, but the man left without paying because he had no cash, and he yelled to Hasan "give your blessings". However, The Little Hasan was too weak to claim his rights, and no other authority was there to protect him.

The ruling classes of the village become clearer in the story "Yeni Dünya (The New World)". The lives of the peasants are depended on individuals, who are the feudal village masters. "Anyone visiting the city would stay in their inns, would benefit from their intermediary services in selling the crop and the loads, would borrow from them when money needed, would appeal to them in case of an official problem or a court issue" (Ali, 1966:132). Moreover in the "Yeni Dünya (The New World)", it is witnessed that the "masters in the cities" are also among the privileged class of the villages. The village reality is told in the "Kanal (The Channel)" as follows: "Nothing is simpler than killing or being killed on these dead lands" (Ali, 2015, 97). The fight for the land and water can make even the fastest friends kill each other. In the "Kağnı (The Tumbrel)", the power of the peasants is not sufficient to claim their rights against the powerful, who grab their lands. A mother of a peasant, who was killed in a land issue, gives up suing the killer in return for two milch goats, a sack of flour, and a bag of sugar (Ali, 2017:10). In the story "Köpek (The Dog)", following some narratives about the unjust hegemony of the feudal village master over the peasants in the village and the city, a sentence is written reflecting the striking fact: "During the times of drought, all of the peasants go to the mountains for eating grass!.." (Ali, 2017, 125).

3. Gendarmery-Collector and Peasant Relations

When the stories are grouped according to their themes, it is observed that the attitudes of the gendarmery and collectors towards the peasants are among the issues that Sabahattin Ali mostly focuses on. This situation means that Ali, at that time, mostly wants to draw the attentions to the relations between the peasants and the officials. In the "Candarma Bekir (Gendarmery Bekir)", a peasant, who was proven to be guilty of an offense, is being transported on foot on a 63 km road from Denizli to Çal. The Gendarmery private, who is accompanying the peasant, behaves mercilessly towards him through the road, not even lets for a rest, drinks his water and eats his meal heartily without offering but showing to him (Ali, 2015, 100). In the "Sıcak Su (Hot Water)", the gendarmery breaks into the house of a peasant and rapes his wife in order to force him to show the place of another peasant that he is seeking for (Ali, 2017, 136). "Kağnı (The Tumbrel)" includes examples of the attitudes of the gendarmery towards the peasants besides the examples of life struggles of the peasants. The dead body of the Sarı Mehmet, who was killed unjustly in a land quarrel that he initiated against the feudal village master, is exhumed from his grave due to an investigation and the body is carried by the mother on the way to the forensic investigation (Ali, 2017, 12).

When the "Bir Firar (An Escape)" is read, it is observed that the only way to be free of the beatings and torture of the gendarmery is to die, or to give the names of other relatives who are not criminal. The

peasants are attempted to be beaten harshly in return for crimes that they even do not know anything about (Ali, 2015, 91). "Kafa Kağıdı (The Identification Card)" reflects three societal facts together about the village. Firstly, the feudal village masters can seize lands using false witnesses. In this process there is no authority that the peasant can resort to. The second fact is related with the road issue. The real cause of constructing roads to the villages is the needs of trade economy and capitalism. When the story is examined, it is understood that roads are being constructed for the villages; however, their cost are being collected from the peasants by force. When the peasants taken into custody for not paying for the road construction are brought to the custodial prison, it is observed that "the appearance of these peasants are miserable, their pants are shredded and parts are hanging, most of them even do not wear shoes" (Ali, 2017, 18). Asım Bezirci highlighted another fact about the peasants in the story "Kafa Kağıdı", it is the perfunctory formal attitudes over the peasants. For example, the 80-year-old Mehmet is being treated as a 29-year-old due to a numerical mistake in his identification card; although he should be exempt from the road tax, he fails to make himself understood (Bezirci, 1987, 106-107).

4. Peasant Intellectual Relations

Four of the stories of Sabahattin Ali, in which he examined the village reality, discuss the relations of the peasants and the intellectuals. Examining these stories, some data can be reached about which aspects the intellectuals are interested in the problems of peasant, who were the largest societal part, or how the perspectives of the intellectuals about the village is shaped. Although the story "Bir Skandal (A Scandal)" seems to be based on the personal love affairs and disappointments of the author, in the background it contains severe criticisms about the intellectuals of the time. At one night when the author was working in the steppes of the Central Anatolia, he attends one of the meetings of the intellectuals. The issues that they discuss are the kind that avoids meddling such as European-Turkish music difference, the flowers grown in the gardens, or poker parties. When the issue comes to a point to utter "The peasant is the master of the nation" maxim, the author leads into the conversation: "The master is called the one, who employs others and who has authority over them; not the ones, who work hard and lose their gains in return for only a handful of something..." (Ali, 2017:81). Actually, this assessment is something like a reproach to the cadres who realized the Republican revolutions. When the author mentions, "Let's not fool ourselves, the peasant has always given, however, in return, he could take nothing, verbatimly nothing!" (2017:82), the intellectuals are bewildered as if they have never heard such an issue before, and a thrilling ambiance is observed among the intellectuals thinking that this issue might bring trouble on them.

In his story named "Bir Konferans (A Conference)", Sabahattin Ali mordaciously hints at the perspectives of the intellectuals about the peasants. When the story is examined, it is understood that the intellectuals of the time make excursions to the villages for giving conferences. However, neither the intellectuals have a feeling for the peasants nor the peasants have for the intellectuals. "An intellectual asking a question to a peasant thinks that why the peasants are so ignorant, while at the opposite side, the peasant thinks that why this man asks such nonsense questions" (Ali, 1966, 125). The appointment of the intellectual and the peasant ends strikingly in the story. At the end of the conference, the speaker asks "Now, tell me, are you convinced?". Stirring as if waking up from a deep sleep, all of the listeners answers "You are definitely right, we understood!". When a retired village teacher asks to the peasants, "Hey dudes! What did you understand from the sayings of this man?", a peasant, restraining his laughter, answers "Oh gentleman! Would you like us to say that we do not understand, and him to tell one more time everything from the beginning?". While the reason of this miscommunication can be interpreted as the issues told in the conferences are irrelevant to the societal-economic conditions and daily problems of the peasants, it can also be explained by the point of the one-sided perspective limited to only conveying information in the Republic era.

The story "Köpek (The Dog)" handles the obvious example of how the intellectuals of a country can be distanced from the peasants of the same country. While an engineer, who was a graduate of a college and afterwards continued education in the US, travels over the central regions of Anatolia with his fiancée, stops his car "with a sudden decision" and speaks with a shepherd feeding his sheep with his dog. The conversation between the shepherd and the intellectual makes the reader think two things. Firstly, the intellectuals are living as if they are the only owners of the country, while regarding the peasants as the country's pets, which need attention. They perceived speaking with a peasant as an activity like sharing time with a pet which needs attention. Second, it is perceived that if the duty of the intellectual is to show the truth to the people, "the true path is that the peasants should prick their ears up and listen to the intellectuals" (Ali, 2017, 130). Unfortunately, it is not an attitude embraced by the intellectuals to perceive the life and the society from the perspective of the peasants or try to understand and seek a solution to the

problems of the peasants from their point of view. According to them, if "the intellectuals are progressive and the peasants fall behind", the important thing that the peasants should do is to listen carefully what their masters say. The intellectual in the story, understands the difference between an intellectual and a peasant, however, lays the burden of the responsibility of this miscommunication to the peasant, therefore punishes the peasant, and shoots his dog "Karabaş" to kill, after which he gets on his car and disappears without a backward glance.

Another story reflecting the contemptuous perspectives of the intellectuals towards the peasants is the "Ses (The Voice)". Traveling from Beyşehir to Konya, the passengers of a truck, which is broken down in a close distance to Konya, naturally scatter around and begin to wait for the repair of the truck. In the meanwhile, the author and his friend is impressed from the voice of a peasant from Sivas, who is playing saz (a Turkish stringed instrument) and singing a folk song. They call him to Ankara and let him sing a song in front of a selection committee. However, the selective committee is so alienated from their own human wealth that the peasant from Sivas does not excite their attention against another candidate with a blond and wavy hair, and a brave look, simply resembling the Westerners (Ali, 2017, 117-118). When the "Ses" is read, it can be stated that the world views of the intellectuals are similar to those of some adolescents and teenagers, who are seeking the protection of another and famous individual and refusing their own parents. When these stories are approached as a whole, it is understood that the peasants, who constitute the larger part of the society in that era, are highly repressed, and that contrary to expectations, the intellectuals, who are supposed to find a solution for this injustice, move away from the peasants.

5. Peasants Feeling of Societally Deceived-ness

The feeling of deceived-ness is a sensitive resentment, which appears when the commitments that are promised to be realized under certain conditions are not fulfilled despite the available conditions. The traces of deceived-ness feelings of the Turkish peasants of that era can be seen in Ali's stories. The cadres leading the War of Independence developed several choices for persuading the peasants to fight against the imperialists, and they declared hope-inspiring statements about the societal interests of the peasants after the war. Among these commitments were the acceptance of the peasants as a "party of the people" group in the assembly and subsequent adoption of populism program. The most important request of the peasants, who would be the fire power of the War of Independence, from the officials was the removal of the feudal exploitation (Şamsutidnov, 1999:154). Although the story "Çirkince (In an Ugly Way)" is being written in the single-party period, it conveys the world view of the peasants comparing it with that of thirty years ago.

When the story is examined, it is observed that the societal-economic conditions of the peasants were better thirty years ago. When the author goes to the village in the 1940s, he speaks with the peasants. While a peasant describes the change during the 30 years as "the people gained nothing. The plains, mountains have been gathered in the hands of several opportunists, that's all!" (2015-105), "you should call the masters to account, who turned this owned-country into a owner-less one" (2015-105); while another peasant says "both the money and the state is in the hands of the rich" (2015, 04). While speaking about the conditions of the peasant, another one emphasizes the "poverty", and says that "the olive trees, and fig trees have been gathered in the hands of several masters, now we are workers at their farms" (2015, 102). According to the picture coming to the existence, some indicators are observed that the societal-economic conditions of the peasants, who fought with great burdens against the imperialist armies to save Turkey from the foreign intruders, were not enhanced in the Republic era, let alone removal of feudal exploitation, the natural wealth such as mountains, plains and trees were gathered in the hands of the village masters or other "opportunists".

6. Conclusion

The researchers studying on the other stories of Sabahattin Ali can reach some new data concerning the societal-class dimensions of the Republic era. However, an attempt to investigate the data concerning the societal-class dimensions of the era in these stories necessitates an in-depth and a long term research. Moreover, we know that there are far-reaching data not only in the stories of Sabahattin Ali but also in some of his novels. This article is limited to only the stories of Sabahattin Ali and only his narratives on peasantry discussed in these stories. However, there might be quite important data even within these limitations that we might have overlooked. The common findings obtained at the end of the examination of thirteen stories with sociological dimensions can be summarized within three sub-headings:

First of all, Turkey peasants, who constitute the largest societal parts of the Republic era, are in a dire hunger and poverty. It is not true to assert that this poverty is the general and transient poverty that a country experiences just after a war. Because the city bourgeoisie and the landlords are again reigning over

the peasants, and their life conditions are more positive. This case shows that the destructions that wars cause are not shared in various societal sections. Second, the peasants are under an obvious and sharp feudal exploitation. Moreover, there is no authority that protects the peasants from the heavy feudal exploitation. The gendarmery is against the peasants while the collectors are holding the collars of the peasants tight. The gendarmery and the collectors are described in the stories as the life-ruining personalities against the peasants. The third point is that, the intellectuals of Turkey are not together with the peasants against this injustice. Being together with the peasants is perceived as an activity like returning home to resume the daily life after going to a zoo to see the animals. Nothing has been in their agenda concerning the problems of the peasants like producing societal solutions, discussing these problems, and ultimately realizing them. The primary agenda of the intellectuals has been to embrace the Western values on each aspect of life, and to teach them to the peasants. Since this process was continued together with the modernization attempts during the Republic era, it may be a cause-effect relation that even today wide societal parts hold themselves at a distance against modernization values.

REFERENCES

- Ali, S. (2015). *Sırça Köşk*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
- Ali, S. (2017). *Kağrı, Ses, Esirler*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
- Ali, S. (1966). *Yeni Dünya*. İstanbul: Varlık Yayınları.
- Ali, S. (2015). *Değirmen*. İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları.
- Bezirci, A. (1987). *Sabahattin Ali*. İstanbul: Amaç Yayıncılık.
- Moran, B. (2013). *Edebiyat Kuramları ve Eleştirileri*. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları.
- Plehanov, G.V. (1987). *Sanat ve Toplumsal Hayat*. (Çeviren: Cenap Karakaya), İstanbul: Sosyal Yayınlar.
- Sencer, M. (1987). *Toplumbilimlerinde Yöntem*. İstanbul: Say Yayınları.
- Şamsutidnov, A. M. (1999). *Türkiye Ulusal Kurtuluş Savaşı Tarihi*. (Çeviren: Ataol Behramoğlu), İstanbul: Doğan Yayınları.