The Genealogy of Halide Edib's Modernist Impulse in *Masks or Souls*
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In *Masks or Souls*, written in Paris in 1937, Turkish author Halide Edib Adıvar makes use of elements of modernist theatre to express her political views. Having been brought up in the metropolis of Istanbul, she spent time in other urban centres like London and Paris, always corresponding and exchanging ideas with literati both in Europe and Turkey. In the play I'm going to talk about, Halide Edib names Nasreddin Hoca, a country savant/sufi whose anecdotes range from the surreal to the sublime, as her inspiration. The tone of the play is informed by Hoca's sufi embracing wit, and yet Nazım Hikmet's 'I want to become a machine' poem recurs like a refrain as the modernist, futurist reflection of the sign of the times. There are several disembodied voices, poems and songs in the play: even the bodies on stage are used as masks or puppets, and thoughts are given through voice over. *Masks or Souls*' aspirations are cosmological as Halide Edib brings the *masks* of larger than life, almost mythical figures of Nasreddin Hoca, Shakespeare, Tamurlaine and Ibn Khaldun to comment on the state of the world. While the presence of Nasreddin Hoca ensures the 'metaphysical' aspect of this quasi-religious ritual, Halide Edib transforms it into a political one where totalitarianism is put on trial, in which Turkish local literary and philosophical heritage is incorporated in a modernist, almost cannibalistic manner.

Halide Edib had to flee into exile in Europe in the 20s and 30s, from the autocratic rule of the founder of the Turkish Republic, fearing she and her husband would be arrested during a purge of liberal MPs not long after the establishment of the republic. Halide's first port of call during her exile was London, and then she and her husband moved to Paris where she continued to write pieces for Turkish magazines and where she also wrote *Masks or Souls*. Her magazine pieces written in 1937 reveal that she was an enthusiastic theatre-goer in Paris and watched adaptations of Bulgakov's *Zoika's Apartment*, and Karel Capek's *War with the Newts* – both modernist plays dealing with the decline of morals and robotization of humans. Her reviews emphasize her disgust with the way particularly women are objectified in the modern world. She comments that such degradation can be found everywhere in the world where there has been a recent regime change. She was a dissenter of the particular project of modernity that the new Turkish republic engaged in in the 20s and the 30s, based on nationalism, statism and industrialism. *Masks or Souls* take all these isms to task, and diverges from her main body of work- which are novels- to shows that literary modernism was very much a sign of the times and a vehicle to express the anxieties of the age. That Halide Edib chose the medium of a play to engage with the disquiet of the times tells us something about the genre and how it is a natural home for the avant-garde, and that these avangardist impulses are not restricted to Western Europe.

The first scene where 'modern' is discussed directly is set in '21st century' and the setting is Akşehir, a town in the middle of Anatolia, the home of Nasreddin Hodja, a figure of folk wisdom who is supposed to have lived in the 14th century whose stories can be traced from the Balkans to Central Asia. His tomb is still visited today, and here, Halide Edib imagines it as being taken over by the cult of the body, children doing gymnastics, that was so prominent in the 1930s, when states were keen to

homogenize the bodies, or masks of their subjects, and synchronize their movements for efficiency in war and factories.

Remziye, character one, is a 'new woman' of the 30s who follows the Turkish republican line and wants to do away with all tradition, and Nasır, second character, is the reincarnation of Nasreddin Hodja, a young Turkish diplomat who is normally stationed in London, but now has been called to Turkey to be sent on a mission of discovery to the city of Kalopatya where new technologies for ridding humans of their prevaricating souls and for making them into efficient machines have been put in place. And this division between the bodies, masks and souls is the central theme around which Halide Edib weaves her play. Halide Edib has two characters discuss the meaning of modernism:

> Remziye, character one: Satire can sometimes kill the most beneficial idea, and in order to become modern, Anatolia has to abandon the habit of satirizing, laughing at everything.
> Nasır, character two: Who knows how many meanings the word modern has though?
> Remziye: (pointing to a tomb where children are doing group gymnastics) The change you see there is the most correct meaning of modernization.

The children, sacrilegiously stomping on Nasreddin's grave are reciting the following poem:

Tirim tirim tirim
Trak, tiki, tak,
I want to machinize […]
I will find a way to do it
And only then will I be happy
The day I place a turbine in my belly
And a couple of propellers on my tail (88)

This is a poem written by Nazım Hikmet (1923), the exiled poet par excellence in Turkish literature. After several periods in jail- a fate Halide and her husband escaped only because they had left the country in time- he fled to Moscow in 1951, the land of machinization. It is one of Halide Edib's coup de theatres to have a poem by a dissident best embody the values and project of the Turkish republic here in this scene. 'I too used to worship the modern' Nasır says, 'Now I feel this illness has effected me and it's as if there is a foreign soul in me. Your mother is right. The best definition of modernism is children who dance on the bones of the dead' (92) he says later to Remziye's daughter.

Much as it uses modern staging techniques, *Masks or Souls* remains a play of ideas. The stage directions for the play are so 'modern' in fact, that it has proven almost impossible to stage it- as the viewpoint and scene changes suggest more the medium of cinema than a play. The whole Turkish republican modernization project of the 20s and 30s is presented in this play like an avant-garde play that the Turkish people were

recruited to act in.[1] Architecture, spatial arrangements, stage directions. The concern for the mechanization of humans is everywhere in evidence in the play- almost harped upon too much. This mechanization was naturally the province of nascent cinema and the influence of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* can be seen evidently particularly when the characters make it to the utopic/dystopic space of Kalopatya.

Halide Edib chooses an allegorical framework to discuss various views on how the world is progressing. The play happens in two spheres: the celestial world where souls of people of historical importance discuss the fortunes of those who are still living 'down below'; *and* the earthly sphere, where some souls are re-sent to report back to the celestial sphere on the misdeeds of humans and their current attempts to get rid of souls. The link between the two spheres is provided by Nasreddin Hodja, whom we meet in the very first scene on his deathbed. His wife, with whom he has several anecdotes of strife, is praying by his side. The first voices we hear are their 'inner voices', a technique Halide Edib uses throughout the play and which can be seen as the corollary to the modernist stream of consciousness in the drama genre. The inner voices take turns to speak- they are not speaking to one another- and there are several references to the anecdotes that will be familiar to anyone who is familiar with Nasreddin Hodja.

In the second scene, Halide Edib's cinematic stage directions start. Nasreddin Hodja is 'sitting on a pink cloud at the top of Sultan mountain' (45) and there are 'transparent figures' with eyes that are like 'torch lights' floating about in the air. Nasreddin has died and passed into the celestial sphere, and will be a go-between. He is in a limbo because he can't let go of the world- particularly his beloved donkey, which features in many of his anecdotes. He is sent down to earth to observe a congregation of anthropomorphized animals around his tomb. We learn that the spirit of animals enter the bodies of the living now and then, and this sets the stage for the Shakespearean goings on that will follow. This is the tomb around which children are doing gymnastics in the scene where the two characters are discussing the meaning of modernity.

In order to give a sense of the political situation of Nasreddin Hodja's times, and how autocratic rule repeats itself through centuries through different incarnations, we are given a scene in the court of Tamerlaine, right after Nasreddin's death. Tamerlaine, is a figure we know both from Nasreddin Hodja anecdotes, and Elizabethan theatre. Halide Edib describes Tamerlaine in detail, down to the twinkle in his eyes, suggesting a camera zoom-in. This is the court where Nasreddin, and the historian Ibn Khaldun were entertained and employed. The stage directions reveal that Ibn Khaldun's inner voice speaks in Arabic, another *coup de theatre* that would have been very difficult to pull off in the 1940s when the state was busy stripping Turkish of its Arabic words (53). It is also a *coup de theatre* in the sense that as the voice of wisdom, Halide Edib has chosen Ibn Khaldun, an Islamic scholar that has had much influence on Ottoman humanities, and been neglected completely by the republican one. Tamerlaine has a discussion with Ibn Khaldun as to the importance of a single powerful man heading a state in terms that are similar to Atatürk's republic, and Ibn Khaldun's criticism comes only as an inner voice. Ibn Khaldun finds it difficult to

[1] This chimes in with another modernist, satirical work that would be published 1961 Architecture is the crystilazation of a culture, as Tanpınar put it

confront Tamerlaine, just as Halide had found difficult to confront Atatürk, the founder of the republic.

There are clear modernist influences in her play writing, however, her patron saint, her sheik, so to speak, remains Shakespeare, whom she loved from an early age, and whose plays she translated as founder and head of the English Literature department in Istanbul University. In his travels between the celestial and earthly spheres, Nasreddin Hodja is accompanied by Shakespeare whom he first sees, equipped with turquoise wings, knocking at the gate of seventh heaven where all souls merge and lose individual consciousness, murmuring to himself: 'To be or not to be'. The scene is explained by a black angel, whom Nasreddin recognizes as Bilal Habeshi- a companion of the prophet Muhammad who was the first to call the call for prayer, a call for prayer that has been the same for centuries throughout all geographies, except for a couple of decades in Turkey, starting in 1932, where it was called out in Turkish. So while down below in Turkey, it is impossible to hear Habeshi's original words, it is possible in this celestial sphere- another *coup de theatre* that was never realized on the stage in Turkey. So with Ibn Khaldun speaking in Arabic, and Bilal Habeshi calling out the call for prayer in Arabic against the edicts of the cultural revolution, the play becomes politically subversive, maybe more so than through the scenes in which the soul crushing characteristics of one man rule are discussed.

Halide Edib has two of her heroes, Nasreddin and Shakespeare meet in a meadow. Nasreddin is seeking his beloved donkey (ACT2 Scene3) and it appears with a donkey's head and a human's body. This is to signify that he is somewhere between the two spheres, about to enter the body of a human on earth. But of course it is also a signal that we are now in Shakespeare territory and soon enough Nasreddin hears a disembodied voice sing the following:

The inside of the walnut is sweet
Yet its skin is bitter like poison
Rosalind's tastes
Twice as sweet (65)

This is a rendering of Touchstone's playful eulogy to Rosalind in *As You Like It*

The sweetest nut has the sourest rind
And Rosalind is that kind of nut.
The man who finds the sweetest rose
Will be pricked by it, and by Rosalind. (Act 3 Scene 2)

Nasreddin and Shakespeare talk about being in this in between place and the division between the soul and the body. Shakespeare likens Nasreddin to Falstaff, which is clearly a point that Halide Edib is trying to get across. Ibn Khaldun, on the other hand, likens Nasreddin to Aesop. Shakespeare is used, to voice the idea that life is a stage and that the characters keep changing masks- that is, in the world of Halide's play, the same consciousnesses come back to the earth in different guises. Nasreddin is pestered by his wife's voice, and Ibn Khaldun suggests they use the latest cure on him- psychoanalysis, which, he says, would be difficult to explain to him: Nasreddin just needs to submit. Nasreddin, as Turkish 'everyman' having to submit to

psychoanalysis crops up later in Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar's work, and can be said to be closely related with both writer's approach to writing.[2]

In Act 3, Halide Edib can no longer contain her cinematic impulses and opens the stage directions with 'This scene happens as a talking picture' and then describes a scene of a meeting of what she calls 'League of Nations', with a picture of Plato in the background. Then the curtain rises, the stage directions continue as follows: 'The celestial orchestra plays a hymn that mimics the winds, waters and the whole of nature and all the souls sing it in unison. When the hymn finishes, the people sit down and one of those seated around the rostrum opens the proceedings' (75) Halide Edib seems to call for a piece of music that is nothing short of Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring'. The director of this celestial league of nations says that people are divided into three: the whites, who represent dictatorial regimes, the reds, self-evidently representing the communists, and the lilacs, the Eflatun in Turkish, which is the Turkish bastardization of Plato's name. The head of the Eflatun is none other than Ibn Khaldun, who opposes both the whites and the reds, and speaks of the importance of the soul. And they send the souls of Nasreddin and Shakespeare to see how the soul-rejecting modern age is faring.

Shakespeare and Nasreddin are sent to the 'beginning of the 21st century' and we see them reincarnated in the bodies of a Turkish diplomat and his English friend, having tea in a small flat 'near London'.[3] The stage directions make it imperative that the audience see that there is a painting of Nasreddin Hodja in this apartment. Nasır (clearly an avatar of Nasreddin) and Şeyk (avatar of Shakespeare)- a name that sounds like Sheikh in Halide's Turkish transliteration- talk about Nasır's moodiness and how things have changed dramatically in the last years in Turkey. Diseases have been eradicated, technology has developed. Turkey, in this 21st century, is ruled by someone called Timur, who is the best of friends with the Greek PM. It would be good to remember here that Halide's most popular novel *Shirt of Flame* chronicled the Greek occupation of Izmir, which makes this a scene of projected reconciliation between the two nations.[4]

It turns out that Şeyk has just come back from a trip to China where he finds that the 'individual' has completely disappeared. Halide Edib also has him say that as an Anglo-Saxon who values individualism, he finds this distasteful. Halide has Şeyk criticize the Chinese for wanting become like Europeans of the 20th century, in the

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[2] The character of Nasır whom we saw earlier discussing modernity and whose body Nasreddin will inhabit, is also reminiscent of one of Tanpınar's famous characters Mümtaz, torn between 'our old and new life', the Turks' old life of the soul, and the republic's new life of the mask.

[3] - a piece of information that is, again, more suitable to either a novel or a film.

[4] Halide is very open about these figures being avatars of historical characters. She has Şeyk, himself avatar of Shakespeare, working as a reporter for Manchester Guardian—oh but that's Toynbee- say:

> I was intrigued to see him with the Greek PM. Mr. Timur's face looks very much like the pictures of Tamerlane. He even limps like him. He is a great leader. When it comes to Sokrat Sokratides; he is like a picture of Socrates. It seems to me as if the old Tamerlane and the old Socrates have come on a trip to the world from the afterlife to found a new rule in the Near East (82)

Near east being the safest place on earth 107, Not only that but Turkey about to launch a Near East Nations Assembly in Istanbul

21st century. At a time when Europe is trying to find its way back to the soul, the Chinese are out to eradicate it altogether. Şeyk/Shakespeare says he'll write a book called 'The Specter of Europe' in which this old spectre haunts the East and enchants them, leading us, in turn, to as how much European cultural heritage haunts Turkey and Halide's work. As we have seen, Shakespeare is a direct influence, and the modernist plays that Halide has seen in Paris are concomitant with her own anxieties of modernisation. The entangled heritages and influences are evidenced in the fact that the plays that she has been impressed by in Paris are adaptations of novels from communist countries. So the winds are blowing in either direction. In a way, her straddling between the genres, and heritages makes the play modern, as much as it evinces an inbetweenness and an indecision about what she wants her work to be. There is no doubt about the message she wants to gets across though, as she hammers it in through, in quite a Brechtian way, through larger than life characters of Nasreddin, Shakespeare, Ibn Khaldun and Tamurlaine.

The character of Nasır, possessed by Nasreddin, observes the situation in the ultra-modern Kalopatya- the country Turkey wants to model itself:

> I see the spectre of the east in the west. The east used to always go on about the soul. Now it's left the soul and keeps talking about the body. It wants to get rid of the soul in the new world that it has founded. The West spent all its energies for material things for centuries and now is tired of it. I have come here to see that everyone's talking about the soul here (84)

We would do well to re-remember that she wrote the play in 1937 in Paris, a couple of years before it fell into German hands, and the fear of war, and how modernization feeds into the war machine is felt throughout the play. Her concerns about the war become evident when she also has the souls of Clemanceau, Ibn Khaldun and Wilson discuss the possibilities of a lasting peace. (106) Wilson offers democracy as the solution to which Shakespeare replies: 'If democracy is to roll over the world with a rolling pin and making everything uniform, that seems to be working…Clothes are the same like a uniform, faces also uniform'[5]

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[5] P. 106
Nasır's mother, Sabire Cebe, a woman who seems to belong in a Virginia Woolf novel enters with vase of carnations and puts it on a table. She is a woman in her fifties, tall and slender. She is wearing a long black dress, with white arms and collars, made of lace. Her hair is grey, parted in the middle, and gathered at her neck. Her cheeks are sunken, and her temples narrow, her hazel eyes have a hint of irony and a smile. In this constellation, her son with the seizures is Septimus Smith. 'Because we have become modern they want to turn the people into marionettes in a shop window' (96), she says echoing Halide Edib's views on the cultural and clothing revolution in Turkey, particularly that of the hat, that led to her own exile.

Shakespeare: (lights his pipe, sits by the river) The state of the world is not such that can be glossed over at a picnic like this (Shakes head) There is something rotten in this rickety world
Wilson: I left 14 principles behind me which should cure all the ills of the world
Clemanceau: Even God's 10 commandments did not solve the problems of mortals, you think your dry 14 words will do it? Ha ha ha ha, so Shakespeare, have the three principles of our holy revolution been established in the world? Have equality, fraternity, freedom spread throughout?
Ibn Khaldun: Those principles do not belong to the French Revolution but to Islam
Bryan: Leave that all to one side, tell me, is the idea of peace progressing in the world? That's what we need to know
Wilson: All depends on the American model of democracy in my opinion
Shakespeare:

Timur, the Turkish President interested in Kalopatya's progress calls it: 'A most remarkable city. A country that has for the first time been able to bring down the seven headed monster we call 'the past'… A first in the history of nations, a country that has modelled life according to science', and in ACT 4 we get a glimpse of it the endgame of all this modernisation, and killing off the soul: taxis flying in the air, and then a zoom into a studio- all very Metropolis. (116 detail) The citizens of the town vary in their approval of the machinized state of their city. Particularly one Karel seems horrified at the idea that soon women will not bear children but that humans will be produced in test tubes (115)

The play ends in the celestial sphere, Nasreddin admitting failure, and Shakespeare saying films have taken the place of the theatre, and are being preferred to his plays. Thus, Halide Edib's anxiety about genre comes across- however, she is convinced, whatever form narrative might take, the war between the body and the soul will continue to be a theme. And to alert humans to this split, Ibn Khaldun, as master of ceremonies says, Nasreddin will have to go between the two spheres several more times in the future, elevating this folk figure almost to the status of a prophet.