

## **Human Landscapes And Art As Material Witness**

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### **Abstract**

Nazim Hikmet profoundly impacted Turkish literature and the socio-political landscape. He is acclaimed for exploring personal struggles, his unwavering community and national loyalty, opposition to oppressive regimes, and selfless love. Despite facing persecution and imprisonment, By employing the powerful brevity of poetry as a medium of bearing witness Hikmet employed his literary production as an instrument of resistance and advocacy He experimented with various literary forms to depict human experiences amid challenging socio-political conditions, revitalizing modern Turkish poetry through his masterpiece Human Landscapes from My Country (2002). This work, shaped by the social and political context of his era, retains a timeless quality. Hikmet's poetry, rich in humanistic themes, establishes deep connections with diverse readers

**Keywords:** Resistance, Writing, Witness Persecution, Human Landscapes and Humanistic themes.

Nazim Hikmet, a celebrated Turkish poet with communist beliefs, has significantly influenced Turkey's literary landscape by contributing profusely to literature .Hikmet bears the eye witness to all the trauma and suffering he and his people has undergone during the most tumultuous times of history. He is significantly influenced by historical circumstances in his poetry and believes the idea of poetry as “participant and witness”. Hikmet’s poetic lens though focused on the plight of the proletariat class and the marginalized members of the Turkish society, transcends geographical borders.

Hikmet's radical perspective challenged existing power structures and sparked critical discourse within Turkish society. Despite persecution and imprisonment for his political views, Hikmet remained resolute in using his writing as a tool for resistance and advocacy. Hikmet's early life experiences and exposure to various ideologies informs his worldview and inspires his literary pursuits. He explored diverse literary forms, such as poetry, plays, and essays, to capture material human experiences amid challenging socio-political conditions. His relentless critique of authoritarianism resonated deeply with many Turks, inspiring a defiance against oppressive regimes. Hikmet's literary work presents readers with authentic emotions, fostering a deep connection with universal human experiences.

Hikmet elevates historical narratives of the oppressed and victimized class to prominence, positioning their experiences and conditions as the primary focus. His poetry engages with history, articulating the experiences of individuals through multiple perspectives. He posits that poetry should endeavor to express the history of people, particularly the defeated, victimized, and oppressed. Hikmet's historical accounts function as a response to the existing regime. He composed from the perspective of the victim and oppressed. The human condition, for Hikmet, serves as the central focus in his poetry, providing a means for seeking solutions. Critic Howard Fast asserts that poets like Hikmet perceived themselves as voices for the human condition, defiantly resisting "dark times" and uniting to promote unity and peace. Despite enduring years of political persecution and imprisonment, Hikmet and his poetic work address those who suffered loss and anguish, bearing witness to the tides of history.

Terrence Des Pres in *Poetry and Politics: The example of Nazim Hikmet* (1978) writes that for Hikmet the human condition comes before political engagement. His literary production embodies the historical experience of people and the humanist resonance is employed in a way that enables him to combine lyric and political elements without reducing poetry into a propaganda vehicle.

The poetry composed by Hikmet exhibits a deliberate arrangement and cadence, suggesting that the experiences of individuals in terms of grief and hardship cannot be equated and that every instance of trauma necessitates an individualized comprehension.

Hikmet was introduced by Nermine Mouvafac as "Turkey's Communist Poet" with a prophetic vision: "He is Nazım Hikmet, communist poet, perhaps the only poet of the new generation who

will leave a lasting mark” (Mouvafac 509). Mouvafac glorified Hikmet as a universal writer “poised between East and West” (514). While quoting lines from Nazım Hikmet, she remembered Whitman’s poetry and pondered on their main similarity, which is the appeal for brotherhood (515). In the following years, many American authors and poets who referred to the Turkish poet compared him to Whitman. A famous case in point is the poet and critic Edward Hirsch and his foreword to Hikmet’s *Human Landscape from My Country* (2001):

Hikmet is one of the great poets of social consciousness. He is a figure comparable, say, to Federico Garcia Lorca and Miguel Hernandez, to César Vallejo and Pablo Neruda, which is to say that he was a Whitmanesque poet of the empathic imagination who felt his way into the lives of other people, who put his wild creative energies at the service of a human vision. (Hirsch vii)

Nazim Hikmet's *Human Landscapes* is renowned for its portrayal of the resilient nature of the human spirit amidst social and political strife. As a voice for the oppressed and marginalized, Hikmet's verses are infused with empathy and a drive to speak out against injustice, celebrating the endurance and resistance of the human spirit. His epic poem, *Human Landscapes from My Country*, (2002) depicts the struggles and triumphs of everyday people, highlighting themes of suffering, treachery, affection and courage. It explores a range of human emotions and situations with ordinary characters such as Halil, Dr. Faik, Ismail, Zoe and others usually ignored by official histories.

Hikmet often depicts himself in public settings, such as trains and prisons, in his poetry. His biographical collage, marked by vivid portrayals, draws from individuals he met in Bursa prison, who were not esteemed figures like “generals or billionaires, but workers, peasants, and craftsmen known only within their local domains like factories and workshops (Hikmet 10). As Hikmet writes:

They who are numberless

Like ants in the earth

Fish in the sea

Birds in the air

Who are cowardly,

Brave

Ignorant  
Wise  
And  
Childlike,  
And who destroy,  
And create,  
My epic tells only of  
Their adventure (Hikmet 150)

Human Landscapes covers the period from 1908 to 1950, a nearly half-century marked by significant upheaval, including two world wars, the Bolshevik and Chinese revolutions, and anti-imperialist movements in Turkey, Turkish War of Independence and other colonized regions worldwide. Nazim Hikmet describes the conflicting moods of defeat and hope after World War I in his Epic of Independence War, which appears in part in Human Landscapes, Book 2. Hikmet writes:

We saw the flames, we saw betrayal.  
Our spirits raged, our flesh endured.  
Those who held out were not giants,  
bereft of love and passion, but human beings  
with their unbelievable weaknesses, scary power,  
[---]  
The men wore long coats  
and went barefoot...  
They had fur hats on their heads  
and in their hearts, grief  
and boundless hope...  
Men were defeated, ungrieving and hopeless.  
With bullet wounds in their flesh,  
they were abandoned in village rooms. (Human Landscapes, pp. 157–58)

The epic, told in five books, follows a circular path, starting with a train journey from Istanbul to Anatolia and returning to Istanbul. It centers on political prisoner Halil, beginning with his transport to Ankara and his life in prison. However, Halil is not depicted as the hero but as an observer—sometimes the narrator—among various "common" protagonists like Corporal Ahmet, worker Kerim, poet Jelal, and partisan Zoe, as well as antagonists like submariner Hans Mueller, journalist Nuri Jemil, arms dealer Hikmet Alpersoy, and intellectual Osman Nejip. The narrative is a patchwork of substories, narrated by an omniscient anonymous narrator and the characters through their dialogues. These sub-stories, covering topics such as Soviet resistance, German aggression, modernization in Turkey, and the Turkish War of Independence, together provide a multifaceted account of the twentieth century from multiple Turkish perspectives.

The Turkish War of Independence is typically associated with Ataturk, yet Hikmet calls Ismail from Arhave, who died transporting a machine gun to the resistance, as the true hero. Similarly, in the Russian resistance against the Nazis, 18-year-old partisan Zoia, executed by Nazi forces, is highlighted over Joseph Stalin. This narrative presents individuals in realistic contexts rather than using grandiloquent language for eulogizing great men.

By letting different narratives from people and portraying them in an opposition instead of harmony, reflects the reality of the world this work is written in. Mutlu Konuk in his Introduction to Human Landscapes writes:

Hikmet had no real contact with Anatolian peasants, who made up nearly ninety percent of Turkey's population. The prison stay gave him a true education in what it meant to be a "poet of the people," and the experience enabled him to write "Human Landscapes," which is filled with characters based on real-life models from Bursa Prison. Hikmet wrote: "the people depicted - sometimes in five lines, some times throughout the first three books - in "Landscapes" are people whose lives I personally witnessed; (Konuk ix)

Howard Fast's assessment in "To Nazim Hikmet" (1950) of "Human Landscapes" underscores Hikmet's themes of social justice, resilience, resistance, freedom, and equality, reflecting his views on political oppression. Hikmet fights the dark era of oppression and unites people to promote peace and harmony. Hikmet's poetry incorporates singing and song. Azade Seyhan calls singing the "power of Hikmet's words to fire his audiences and enlist them in the fight against tyranny."

Nazim Hikmet highlights the persistent realities that characterize the lives of the working class in his commentary. He delves into the most challenging conditions that permeate Turkish society, elucidating their far-reaching consequences on the people that are constantly at the brink of authoritarianism and Fascism. Nazim Hikmet's writings shed light on the denial exhibited by the ruling elites with the intention of motivating the suffering class towards a more promising future. He expressed weariness and discouragement of the prevailing societal structure. Nazim Hikmet adheres to a Marxist viewpoint on society and urges the working class to oppose the privileged class who exploits them both during the day and at night. Goksel Aymaz, a thinker with a reputation for his work in cultural sociology, examines the epic "Human Landscapes" and provides a critical viewpoint on Nazim Hikmet by quoting Schiller, Michelet, Marcus, and Adorno, as well as all other authors who have written on art and artists, notably Bourdieu. To produce this evaluation, almost every aspect of Nazim has been researched. The book is prominent in the body of literature on Nazim Hikmet. This book portrays him as a poet who relies on his social connections rather than his principles and makes choices based on these concessions. According to the book, a product of his brilliance and creativity, "Nazim Hikmet not only brought about changes, but was also affected by them."

Nazim Hikmet's "Human Landscapes" serves as a vehement example of Hikmet's powerfully capturing the essence of profound human suffering. Hikmet endured and witnessed significant hardship throughout his life, including imprisonment and exile, which he wove into his literary works.

The work touches the themes of sadness and loss with a remarkable impact within the constraints of lyrical expression. In this instance, he subtly acknowledges the presence of marginalized voices that have endured persecution in various manifestations, as opposed to focusing solely on his personal encounters. Azade Seyhan in his article "Enduring Grief: Autobiography as "Poetry of Witness" in the Work of Assia Djebar and Nazim Hikmet" (2003) writes that "Hikmet's art exhibits a deliberate arrangement and cadence, suggesting that experiences of loss and suffering are always incomparable, and writer has to approach each instance of trauma on its own terms". (Seyhan 169) Hikmet effectively employed the powerful brevity of poetry as a means of bearing witness to suffering, drawing inspiration from notable predecessors such as Heinrich Heine, Bertolt Brecht, and W.H. Auden, and numerous other "attentive listeners of human

tragedy”(169) who have used the powerful compactness of art as “material witness”(169) of human suffering.

Pablo Neruda while discussing Hikmet's tragic end in *Memoirs* (1977) writes:

A legendary writer kept in prison for 18 years [...] condemned the punishment of hell. The trial was conducted on a warship platform. [...] My brother poet felt his strength failing him. [...] He began to sing [...] sang all the songs, all the love poems he could remember, his own poems, the ballads of the peasants, and the people's battle hymns. (196)

Hikmet's artistic and humanitarian devotion to his art, even in the face of adversity, serves as a testament to the power of art as a means of resistance. As Claude Roy in “A Just Man, a Master of Song in Nazim Hikmet” (2002) points out, “singing becomes a way out of torture, a means of resistance and protest, a metaphor for struggle, and Nazim Hikmet became its master, ‘a master of song’. (Roy 205) Hikmet's poetry continue to inspire and serve as a reminder of the lasting power of the human spirit.

Critic Howard Fast in “To Nazim Hikmet” 1950 writes In those "dark times" ironically, given Brecht's comments on Hitler's totalitarian regime which he had managed to escape, it was a crime to sing of “life, of peace and hope”.(Fast 1950) Poets like Nazim Hikmet proved as advocates of humanity, protesting against the rule of "dark times" to promote peace.

Neruda while writing about his artistic and humanitarian devotion observes:

“You sang for all of us, my brother. We need no doubt no longer or wonder what to do. We know now that we must begin to sing” (196).

After years of political persecution, Nazim Hikmet's his poetry reaches all that suffered under authoritative rule, in order to become true witnesses to historical events. Hikmet's several jail compositions eulogize individuals who suffered a similar lot. He refused to lament instead chronicled it to preserve the experience and history.

Carolyn Forche, a poet who has written extensively on the twentieth century “poetry of witness,” writes in the “Foreword” to the new edition of *Poems of Nazim Hikmet*,

With the work of César Vallejo, Pablo Neruda, Rafael Alberti, Yannis Ritsos, Attila József, George Oppen, and Mahmoud Darwish, Hikmet's poetry is marked by the impress of extremity and a faith in the salvific possibility of global fraternity and social

justice, preserving the intensely personal subjectivity of lyric selfhood that finds within the self a capacity for filiation.

To sum up, while Hikmet lived and wrote in an era that witnessed two world wars, the Turkish war of independence, the Russian revolution, and the growing political consciousness and resentment against Western imperialisms in Asian countries and experienced the trauma of displacement, disenfranchisement, prison, and involuntary exile, Hikmet's work was informed by a passionate rejection of unwarranted pain inflicted on innocent citizens by governments the world over. Though a self-styled Marxist and engage writer, Hikmet left an artistic legacy that was not partisan in any accepted sense. But the viscerally engaging power of his verse sensitizes the reader to the plight of invisible and inaudible masses eclipsed by the enormity of history's disasters. Moreover, as Goksu and Timms notes in "The Romantic Communist: The Life and times of Nazim Hikmet, Nazim was mainly concerned with the social question, writing about the problems of proletariat and marginalized. As a witness to injustices, crimes and atrocities particularly, against his people, his poetry continues to expose the illegitimate system to which the authorities cling.

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