Parables as indicators of popular wisdom: The making of piety culture in Turkish television dramas

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Abstract
This article attempts to evaluate the articulation of folk cultural symbols in the context of TV drama to discuss the process whereby the act of storytelling becomes a tool for mediated and moralised teaching. Investigating the relatively new sphere of popular piety offers a suitable avenue for evaluating the nature of popular wisdom; the process by which popular TV dramas borrow from folk culture and popular religion has become a new area of investigation because new mediatised forms of folk culture are now a common feature of many television genres. Tracing the emergent patterns of storytelling, this article analyses narratives extracted from two well-known TV serials, Kurtlar Vadisi (Valley of Wolves) and Deli Yürek (Crazy Heart) in Turkey. It is argued that in both serials the meditative role of the mentor, which involves narrating parables for the hero’s benefit, constitutes one of the significant rhetorical strategies for reconstructing a piety culture.

Keywords
Storytelling, television drama mediation, parables, piety, rhetorical strategies

Introduction
Turkish society has characteristics which oscillate between traditional, modern and post-modern ways of seeing the world. Turkish popular cultural texts offer us an opportunity to study the complex relationship between societal changes and the rhetorical characteristics of different cultural genres. The formation of everyday life in contemporary Turkish society can be clearly observed through an analysis of the relevant genres, including

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television dramas, adaptations of fiction, reality shows, health programmes and magazine programmes. These textual formations represent indicators of the different ideological and cultural transformations underlying cultural and sociological changes in Turkey. There are a number of other processes which additionally serve for the construction of the symbolic marketplace: the privatisation of television channels, impact of globalisation processes on different segments of society, integration of banking and advertising industries into global markets, the boom in domestic consumption, a visible increase in formation of identity claims through the media, and the pluralistic nature of the popular cultural sphere in terms of being a venue for different cultural voices.

With the rise of commercial channels in the 1980s, television has become the most significant medium of entertainment in Turkish society. This dominance has made it increasingly difficult to prevent the dispersal of cultural identities in the public realm. It has been widely argued that developments in global media culture have eroded state hegemony in the cultural realm, making the fragmentation and dispersal of cultural identities inevitable (Öncü, 2006).

TV drama serials, popular fiction, films and other popular media texts borrow from orientalism, neo-liberalism, Islam and modernism in such a way that a *bricolage* emerges as part of the cultural public sphere. In particular, the different lexical choices used in TV drama offer an opportunity to understand the ways in which language and society interact, as well as how they operate both as a sociological phenomenon and as a textual event. This article focuses on the way in which some examples of TV drama adapt and rearticulate a series of traditional forms of narrativity such as storytelling and parables, which have a symbolic power in recreating and legitimating popular wisdom as an important ingredient of populism. Parker (1998) notes the increasing scholarly interest in ‘popular piety’. This is not only because it constitutes one of the major defining facets of developing country cultural models and identity, but also because it is a key element for understanding cultural and political conflicts resulting from the globalisation process (Parker, 1998).

Popular piety is constructed through a process, facilitated by the media, of mediation: that is, the mutuality between new forms of communication and the institutionalised form of communication. Thus, this article not only provides examples of dialogised texts stemming from popular wisdom depicted through TV drama, but also focuses on the implications of articulating such examples of narratives offered as sources for moral values and popular theodicy. Therefore, this article addresses the following questions: what are the rhetorical characteristics of Islamic piety contested through particular texts such as parables? Does this mediated piety offer an avenue for immediacy in spiritual interaction to be scripted through storytelling? This article seeks to analyse the ways in which TV drama employs rhetorical strategies and aesthetic qualities by ‘storifying’ a devotional discourse and a consensus narrative emphasised by Thorburn (1987). It does this by taking into account the complex entanglement of traditional religion, borrowing from Sufism and approaching piousness from a perspective of mediation which regards media intrinsic to religion.

In order to analyse the role of parables as indicators of piety in Turkish TV drama, first, the role of mediatisation and religion will be evaluated, so as to position the recent evolution of the Turkish media and popular cultural genres. Second, examples of
dialogised texts from two popular TV dramas will be used to identify the rhetorical features of parables as accommodated into TV narratives. The analysis will employ the rhetorical approach introduced in Burke’s theory of redemptive cycle, as well as some of the rhetorical features of Sufi teachings.

**Mediatisation and popular religion**

The ambivalent nature of Turkish modernisation always has had a continuing impact on the complex relationship between the media industries and the manifestations of media texts. Unusual and unexpected representations and the verbosities of everyday life cannot be adequately represented by conventional codes such as traditional versus modern, sacred versus profane, urban versus rural and Western versus Eastern.

Recently, Turkish society has been experiencing strains and struggles over various issues, one of which is embedded in the history and politics of identity. The transition to democracy in Turkey had important consequences in terms of the struggle between secularists and Islamists. The logic of revolutionary politics was replaced with the logic of democratic politics, a process which aimed to balance the voter sensibilities (Toprak, 2005). The visibility of Islam in the republic increased with the rise to power of the pragmatically conservative and Islam-friendly Justice and Development Party after 2002 (Cizre, 2008). This party also preached a ‘politics of patience’ or a ‘strategy of patience for change’ to both liberal democratic and Islam-sympathetic constituencies (Duran, 2008). Although the establishment’s resistance to juxtaposing Islam and secularism was apparent in the discourse of the Justice and Development Party, increasing polarisation of secular republicanism and Islamic culture has been revealed in ambivalent symbols produced by several avenues of the media.

The examples of media texts manifest the hybrid character of cultural and sociological characteristics, which have been affected by the way in which the media industries have evolved in time. The period spanning the privatisation of TV channels after the 1980s is considered to be the most important in terms of integrating the Turkish cultural production world into the neo-liberal logic of media institutions. The increasing integration of political institutions and the media created a new equilibrium, which allowed major cultural and political actors to negotiate over the meaning-making processes in popular cultural phere. The support of political actors on the issue of easing investment in the media demanded compensation in the form of creating a world of spectacle, à la Debord (1983[1967]): that is, the creation of ‘stars’ as the major figures or personae in media texts (Ergur, 2002). The media’s function began to embrace not only a wider spectrum, from the observer/consumer or the spectacle, but also the participant/actor actively involved in creating media texts. Eventually, the media became a major agent in society, in a position to reveal the mundane, sacred, modern, traditional and hybrid features of various different cultural routines. The Turkish media became more flexible, increasingly able to reflect different cultural styles and values. The cultural and political ties developed with international institutions and organisations signified a new trend in mediation, in terms of rapid circulation of all kinds of symbols in social life. As struggles over political and cultural issues emerged in different mediation processes, media texts increasingly articulated tensions caused by identity crises, social problems and demands.
to become part of the globalisation process. Television has been one of the most important media in the formation of a cultural public sphere. While the 1970s to 1980s witnessed the domination of foreign productions such as *Dallas*, the production of national TV dramas peaked after the 1990s, highlighting the role of media technology, the adaptation of local genres and the reflection of struggles between many different identity markers, including secular, traditional, masculine, feminine, Turkish, Kurdish, Sunni and heterodox (Alevi). Because of the highly competitive market, TV channels began introducing very innovative languages to stimulate senses and emotions.

The 1990s also witnessed the proliferation of new political discussion programmes on TV channels, symbolising politics as part of the world of spectacle. Some marginalised voices were offered new outlets to challenge hegemonic practices. The commercialised, mediated and digitalised nature of popular culture depicted a struggle between liberal, republican and conservative voices, some of whom emphasised the corrosive character of the new media forms at different levels. After the end of the domination of Turkish media by the state-sponsored company TRT (Turkish Radio and Television), private channels increased the visibility of different cultural voices, which were able to create new cultural markers. Nevertheless, there seems to have been an oscillation between neo-liberal economic tendencies and the implementation of conservative policies in defining normalcy in different spheres of public life. This oscillation has made an impact on the character of media texts, which reveal traces of this struggle.

After the 2000s, television serials reflecting real-life problems became a very popular genre. The portrayal of ethnic identities in drama serials created an opportunity to discuss the existence of other groups, alternative ways of living and other invisible, previously ignored features of social life. One of the most significant features of the serials is the way that they create a feeling of continuity in narration by breaking down the structure of fiction into predictable stages such as beginnings and endings – a process which emphasises the affective role of the narrative in terms of emphasising curiosity and gazing. Such narrative characteristics facilitate audience identification with the main characters: for example, eulogies from fans in the newspapers on the death of leading characters reveal a sphere where the lines between reality and fiction have become blurred (Ahıska and Yenal, 2006).

The backlash against the modern and neoliberal media can be seen through the mediatisation of religion, which was subsumed under the logic of the media. As is well known, the media has the power to control the amount, content and direction of religious messages in society, and this is able to transform religious representation and challenge, and even usurp institutionalised religion. Through these processes, religion as a social and cultural activity has become mediatised. In contrast, mediation, which refers to communication through one or more media, may have no profound impact on social institutions. Mediation concerns the specific circumstances of communication and interaction through a medium in a particular setting (Hjarvard, 2008). On the one hand, the macro social and historical processes described earlier have had a major impact on the mediatisation of religion in Turkish society; and on the other, the ways in which the intertwining of religious practices and new subjectivities has led to a mediated characterisation, consisting of piety, sacredness and spirituality. In other words, the neo-liberal values in individuals’ everyday life has facilitated the dissemination of religious information in such a way that
individuals have begun to form new subjectivities: a process which can be seen to represent the formation of new pious selves. The media has adopted roles previously played by institutions such as family and school as providers of information and moral orientation. Thus, the media has become society’s most important storyteller about society itself (Hjarvard, 2008).

When individuals, regardless of their characteristics, are exposed to the performance of such a storyteller, their faiths and beliefs are shaped also by its logic. As Meyer and Moors (2006) emphasise, religion cannot be analysed outside the forms of mediation that define it. Religion and media need to be understood as co-constitutive, therefore it makes little sense to claim that the former exists prior to the latter (Meyer, 2006). Media offerings tend to be formalised, predictable and sentimental, with positions on good and evil clearly defined, very similar to folk narratives (Hinds et al., 2006). The emergence of new publics in Turkish society signified a new era in which both traditional and modern lifestyles could be represented as contributing to the negotiation of what constitutes a moral, good or ideal life. The circulation of such symbols as traditional, sacred, religious and spiritual became visible in different formats – an outcome of the internet and digital technology. The integration of neoliberal and Islamic publics into Turkish society created the need to understand the role of mediated religion, with its reflections in other spheres of life, such as politics, business and culture.

It has been claimed that religion and media are intertwined in such complex ways that subvert facile oppositions such as spirituality and technology, or faith and reason (De Vries, 2001). This reminds us of the basic characteristics of religion: the positioning of a distance between human beings in the world and the divine realm. This distance can be overcome only through mediation. As Hent de Vries has put it:

[R]eligion does not exist in separation from processes of mediation and mediatisation without and outside of which no religion would be able to manifest or reveal itself in the first place. Mediatisation and the technology it entails form the condition of possibility for all revelation, for its revealability, so to speak. (2001: 28)

New possibilities for mediating a pious public, with its unresolved tensions over legitimising, have been reactivated and reconstructed by developments such as the availability of internet technology, the pluralistic nature of television channels, digital video discs (DVDs) and texting.

As Asad (2001) argues, in identifying religion, we need to delve into the materialities that constitute its form and being. Thus it is important to pay serious attention to the practices of both the religious and the secular in order to account for the emerging piety culture. The particular emphasis of this article on the concept of piety contributes to an understanding of the way that faith is revealed through different devotional practices aimed at creating religious virtues (Asad, 2001). In addition, research on Islamic piety movements has shown how submission and agency are mutuality constitutive processes for individuals who actively seek to inhabit ethical norms and cultivate Islamic virtues (Deeb, 2006; Mahmood, 2005). In Turkey, the previously described ‘politics of patience’ has had an impact on the different forms of the piety culture and led to the construction of a distinctive vocabulary. Similar to the struggles and meanings of secularism and
laicism, the competition between various pious sensibilities and ethical selves can be seen as indicators of inconsistencies and contradictions in Islamic identity formation and, as such, are worthy of study.

Moreover, the representation of popular piety and popular religiousness reminds us of the mediated nature of sacredness and morality. Islamic piety is constructed through different rhetorical and discursive strategies which are important to analyse, because ‘in Islam there is both embodiment and ensoulment. This means that faith should be expressed through bodily practices and being embedded sincerely in the soul in every aspect of a Muslim’s life’ (Subijanto, 2011: 242). Thus it has ‘structures of devotional practices, disciplines for cultivating religious virtues and the evolution of moral sensibilities within changing historical sensibilities’ (Asad, 2001: 142).

If we are to analyse the complex nature of media and religion so as to position the role and the nature of piety, we need to draw a spectrum between the official teachings of texts (sacred books) and the interpretations of those texts embodied in folk wisdom. The more we emphasise interpretations of Islam as embodied in quotidian practices, the more we encounter heterodox teachings, such as Sufism scripted in parables, stories and other genres. One example of this is the visibility of piety through television drama. An outcome of this complex and intertwined process is the articulation of both official and heterodox versions of Islam by media texts. Lipsitz (1990) notes the popularity of television due to its familiar and recurring story narratives and their similarity to tabloid tales and folklore. Turkish TV’s repackaging of Islamic teachings, as well as cultural manifestations of Islam, include the production of programmes and genres, such as the live broadcast of religious ceremonies on sacred days (e.g. the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), prophetic stories, religious prayers, description of Qur’anic verses, conversations about the Qur’an, preaching on Islamic rules and deeds, religious drama, call-in shows, live conversation programmes, inspirational fiction, religious music programmes and adaptations of other literary genres. In addition, there appears to have been programmes on unconventional ways of interpreting Islam: for example, rituals involving the interpretation of Qur’anic verses, a variety of New Age disciplines such as reiki, astrology and Feng Shui, some of which are in fusion with Islam. All of these help us to understand the total picture of televisual moments of the Turkish mediascape formulated by Appadurai (1990).

The majority of secular and non-secular narratives employing storytelling on television tend to borrow from discursive markers of religious piety. Several other dramas in addition to those exemplified in this article and also other genres have involved a similar process, whereby groups are invited by an interlocutor to resolve the tensions stemming from the problems covered in the narrative. This creates a spiritual sensitivity through which the audience learn ‘lessons’, and receive weekly affirmations functioning as moral prescriptions. Stories have a logic that consists of strategies for coding circumstances, participants, states, actions and events in the ‘storyworlds’: that is, the global mental representations that interpreters are prompted to create by written or spoken narratives. With regards to Islam, the narratives on prophetic legends as well as dervishes are thought of as having instructional as well as moralistic implications. The extensive use of folklore and tales as a foundation for miraculous events, characters and anectodes in miracles (karamat) is very common. Accordingly, the articulation of storytelling features
in TV dramas creates an atmosphere of openness to the possibility of spiritual influence and awakening.

**TV drama as a contested site for creating spiritual righteousness: parables in Deli Yürek and Kurtlar Vadisi**

Discursive characteristics of storytelling as a folk tradition in Turkish society are articulated into the texts of a popular genre, that is, television drama, the production and distribution of which have increased nationally and internationally in recent years. Although the themes of dramas vary, the great majority have adapted the characteristics of old classical Turkish movies in particular as melodrama. Love and lust, action and heroism, vengeance and glorification, materialism and altruism are among some of the popular themes which reflect a negotiation among pre-modern, modern and postmodern ways of living. The popularity of this genre has led to the emergence of a culture industry which markets products related to sentimentalised reflections about the ambivalences of modernity.

The struggle over the ideal of modern identity was seen as the major question in many media discourses. These are moral narratives that underscore virtues and vices, and tell a story that promotes the former and punishes the latter. These television dramas serve a moral lesson, reviving the values of traditional societies threatened by change such as secularisation, the most important cultural process of modernisation. The main themes of these serials are suffering and guilt, involving a purifying process from which one emerges into a paradise, albeit an earthly one. Here, a strange mix of machismo and spirituality is exemplified in the relationship between the mentor and the hero (Rey, 2004). The character in the role of mentor, adviser and mediator guides the lead character, usually a male hero engaged in conflict with criminals. After discussing his weaknesses with his mentor, he is instructed through the mediating process of his mentor. This process is reflected in the stories illustrated in this article. On the one hand, the hero is advised how to behave in a moral way through religiously scripted recommendations; on the other hand, the drama offers an eloquent ritualism on popular faith, which serves the formation of an interpretative reference point. Perception of the hero is mediated by the mentor, depicted as possessing the cognitive sources of piety. Audiences are given the opportunity to understand Islamic teachings by relating everyday life struggles to the pedagogy of morality. Such a process serves to package and reconstruct a popular piety culture based on religious as well as pious texts.

The increasing popularity of drama signals a cultural map through which one can interpret the construction of popular wisdom through the politics of language. There is a strong argument that a new narrative is incorporating folk and popular wisdom, with the result that currently, scenarios are being constructed based on religious stories, parables, proverbs, legends and aphorisms. In most dramas, stories, parables and proverbs are the main ingredient of intertextuality, so as to buttress the story and the narrative, which have a didactic and literary characteristic. It is possible to argue that classical forms of storytelling render the textual material more convincing and more didactic, since the lexical characteristics of these texts are based heavily on religious and traditional themes. Therefore, the concept known as ‘folk wisdom’ is narrated through traditional registers,
verses or other pious forms, based on Sufi teachings and other forms of religious and folkloric texts.

Various different sacred characteristics of the texts used in the dramas include Islamic teachings as the source of moral vocabularies. The major discursive marker of these texts is parables told by a leading character in the drama, representing the ultimate moral authority, steeped in the traditions of folk wisdom. The mentor–hero relationship is characterised by a quest for discovering the truth. The mentor or raconteur is expected to use their wisdom as a panacea for the hero’s misdeeds. The narratives based on parables and short stories not only offer a familiar social world based on the idea of justice, heroes and villains, but also promote soul-searching, which is a necessity after exposure to such a chaotic world. Therefore, the storytelling embedded in these dramas both constructs mediated sacredness, and redefines the conditions of virtuous viewing, constructed as a necessity for protecting the culture of piety which, it is claimed, has been undermined by other genres.

Thus, in the following evaluations the purpose is to highlight media texts, particularly those selected for this study, borrowing from sacred markers. In order to do this, reference is made to the ritual of storytelling while serving to offer different narrative possibilities. Both of these serials have an epideictic rhetorical feature, pitting the good/moral against evil/immoral cultures. They share features such as bizarrely improbable plots, extravagant villains, action scenes resembling Hollywood action movies, men in gangland groups dressed in designer outfits, scenes from living in fashionable Istanbul, various types of ballistics designed to stimulate emotions, torture and murder scenes, images of victimised lower-class families waiting to be rescued by a warrior, women portrayed as servants of men, secluded places where powerful men gather in darkened rooms, government agents used as a proxy for the war among different nationalities, and various types of bravery and bravado identified with the power of the nation. In order to exemplify the arguments made in this article, dialogised texts from two popular TV dramas have been selected: Deli Yürek (Crazy Heart) and Kurtlar Vadisi (Valley of Wolves).

Deli Yürek is a story about a very brave young man, a worker, Yusuf, seeking justice and morality in life. He lived a normal life until selected by his commander to become a special agent in the fight against the enemy. Brave, charismatic, handsome, honest and passionate about justice, Yusuf is guided by the obligation to ‘do the right thing’. He becomes a hero by fighting against outlaws, members of the gangland world that he inhabits. Despite being engulfed in the negative world of these evil men, he is able to maintain a normal existence in the world of his friends, relatives and all those who live in a moral way. The binary opposition between the positive and the negative worlds is the main theme of the story, which is based on events and incidents showing that the immoral and criminal world only brings about evil forces and misdeeds. The epideictic character of the narrative dictates how the text praises, affirms or condemns the major values of the heroes and/or villains.

Yusuf’s relationship with his moral mentor and best friend, the birdman Kuşçu, is key to understanding the aestheticism created by the text’s articulation of parables. The birdman, so named because of his habit of feeding birds, is Yusuf’s guide in the dilemmas that he faces in a cruel and evil world. Yusuf, a powerful man, will only accept the
birdman, with his spiritual powers, as his interlocutor. This spiritual righteousness, implied on occasions through the narrative power of his storytelling, acts as a force for mediation between the evil and spiritual worlds. The birdman is able to predict the future and sees Yusuf’s life in his dreams. Thus he is able to guide Yusuf, although caveats about the importance of virtuousness, storified in parables, are implied rather than imposed. The birdman, who gives advice through stories, already knows or borrows from proverbs, verses, hymns, mystic figures, poems of spiritual nature and interpretations of dervishes, all of which signify folkloric wisdom and telos. Thus, the storytelling is employed to clarify the duality between the sinful and the virtuous or moral. The parables as metaphors serve to construct a mediated narrative based on morality and piety.

As Neale (2007) notes, stories create a mood in which listeners are most open to the possibility of spiritual influence. Enmeshed in the chaotic world of outlaws and evil forces, Yusuf finds solace by discussing his life with his mentor, whose aesthetic narratives focus on moral probity. Yusuf, compelled to make the necessary sacrifices and bring about retribution, seeks purgation for his great suffering.

**Parable 1: the metaphor of whirling dervishes**

Yusuf and Kuşçu are having a conversation on the roof. Yusuf has been fighting with some gangland drug barons, having escaped with a suitcase filled with money from the drug trade. He asks Kuşçu to keep the suitcase in a safe place for him.

Yusuf: I want to keep this suitcase.
Kuşçu: Do you want me to keep the money which belongs to Black Hamid?
Yusuf: Yes, I said keep it.
Kuşçu: Am I supposed to keep it for you?
Yusuf: If it’s necessary, you should. It’s the blood money for Feraye. They will build a school.
Kuşçu: Let’s put it here, I’m sure it’s illegal cash – I wouldn’t be surprised if it has evaporated.
Yusuf: That’s fine.
Kuşçu: Take it.
Yusuf: Kuşçu, you don’t know what it’s like these days. If I keep this I’m going to have to kill one of these jackals every day. Take it.
Kuşçu: Well, let me have both of them. Let’s see what happens.
Yusuf: What do you mean?
Kuşçu: The world is turning. The fate is turning, men are whirling. What did Bektashi3 say? There is no greeting for those who are not whirling. Why? His cuffs were caught in the millstone, right? You should not lose control. Your whirling should not be skewed: when you whirl, you should do it right, just like the world, just like fate. There are two types of whirling, Yusuf. There’s this guy, he’s whirling, he’s fickle. There’s another guy, he’s whirling too – but he’s a wise guy. There is a difference. (*Deli Yürek*, episode 33, 4 October 1999)
As is well known, the whirling dervishes signify a spiritual ritual as a vehicle for embracing all humanity in Sufi teachings. A dervish participates in a formal ceremony where semazens (whirling dervishes) reach a state of ecstasy through meditation. In pursuit of this perfection, they reach a stage where they abandon all ego and personal desires. While whirling, both arms are open, the right directed to the stars, the left turned down towards the earth. Thus, in recommending Yusuf to whirl like a real dervish, the birdman not only attempts to console him, but also reminds him that the imperfect world he that inhabits can be transformed into perfection by moral behaviour and belief in God. He is advised not to let his ‘cuffs be caught in a millstone’ – that is, to enter a condition where he stops whirling, a transition from telos to pathos. The lack of room for compromise in morality forces him to be clear, concise and consistent in making difficult life choices and ways of finding solace in a chaotic world. The dynamic between the immediate and the mediate, defined as one of the important features of religion, is epitomised by the prescriptive role of parables, proverbs and aphorisms.

The struggle between hero and villains is narrated in another television drama, Kurtlar Vadisi, a long-running drama which created its own culture, making icons of the lead character and creating a subculture among mainly males from diverse backgrounds. The hero, Polat Alemdar, fights against the most powerful gangland leaders in Turkey. He was recruited by a secret agent who believes in the idea of an independent Turkey, a ‘country which is not for sale’. Polat, portrayed as the son of the most powerful businessman and a member of an international community of the elite, is kidnapped by a state agent and raised by a group of devout people. His boss, a secret agent with strong nationalistic sentiments and a decisive nature, introduces Polat as a member into the community of gangland leaders and secret agents competing for domination and attempting to undermine Turkish society.

The opening line of the long-running television serial begins with an allegoric statement: ‘This is not a mafia serial’, heralding a complex mediation process carried by the narrative. The wolf signifies a territory where aggression is inevitable and only the powerful can survive. The arena or the public space where the wolves compete bears no relation to civil life. Rather, only those who are masculine, honest and genuine and are prepared to sacrifice themselves for their values and virtues can survive. In order to survive among the wolves, one needs to be powerful, both physically and spiritually. The gangland leaders fight using an array of clever methods, some of which are violent; the hero also learns how to survive in this battle – he not only shows moral standing, but also acts according to a code of rules and norms signified by the phrase delikanlılık in Turkish culture (‘crazy blood’). A delikanlı is honourable, never resorting to unfair means against an enemy, and is protective towards women but never accepts them as equal. Similarly, the motherland is coded as a woman, with the state as a protective father.

The ways in which masculine identity and nationalism are interrelated in this drama also create a cultural sphere whereby a mentor is represented as having the moral powers needed to theorise and justify the deeds and duties of the hero. Polat’s stepfather, usually referred as Father Omar, has extensive knowledge of the history of religions, saints, dervishes and the prophets, whose deeds and sayings are presented as the major discursive marker in the storytelling rituals. Polat seeks moral consultation, especially in times of moral crisis, when he is disempowered as a hero searching for truth. He usually speaks
through aphorisms which complements the textual features of proverbs and parables. He fights against and executes law breakers, but is himself tortured. After escaping various enemy traps, he asks for rationalisation for his deeds, which are depicted as heroic achievements. The rhetorical perfection of the stories is juxtaposed with his imperfection as a human being, which is empowered through voices constructed as deriving from the spiritual and the transcendental world.

**Parable 2: the metaphor of metaphor**

Polat and his father Omar are having a conversation in Omar’s house.

Omar: I fell asleep and forgot the time – you’re right, your mother must be worried.
Polat: Did you forget my mother or the time?
Omar: Is it possible to forget what is unforgettable? Sometimes I become preoccupied, that’s all.
Polat: Now what father?
Omar: This time, I tried to find out the secret about the opposition and attraction between the imaginary and the real, I tried to catch the relationship between the metaphorical and the truthful.
Polat: What is metaphorical? What is true?
Omar: The metaphorical: you and I, me and your mother, you and Elif [Polat’s deceased girlfriend], we are all a dream. All of us are asleep. We wake with death and then truth begins. There are those who die before they decease – for them, the truth begins in this world.
Polat: Does that mean that seeking the truth means wishing for death?
Omar: No, my son. It’s not acceptable to want to die. It’s all right to ask to die before death. What seeking the truth means is to learn how not to commit to the mortal world; that is love, or being immortal. Love requires someone to detach themselves from the world.
Polat: Is it supposed to mean that my commitment to Elif is only metaphorical?
Omar: Just metaphorical.
Polat: In other words, it is not real.
Omar: Every mortal being is exempt from the truth.
Polat: But why? Though time has passed, I feel as if Elif is the most important truth of my life. That’s why there is no space for another woman while I feel the truth about her.
Omar: There is an old saying: ‘You can eat a big piece, but do not utter a great word.’
Polat: But she is real! That’s how I feel.
Omar: That’s the cynicism about the metaphorical. It reveals itself as the truth. We are not real, my son. We are the revelations of the reality. We are not supposed to utter great words. Was it you who fell in love with Elif? What made you fall in love, what made her fall in love with you – it’s God. You’ll experience the metaphorical until you fall in love with God. (*Kurtlar Vadisi*, 24 April 2007)
This dialogue, which enlightens what is metaphorical through using metaphors, constructs a version of popular theodicy in order to create a feeling of spiritual awakening. Polat needs to be reminded of the metaphorical nature of mundane struggles in order to be able to distance himself from the actual realities of his deeds: thus he is made aware that the spiritual world is the real world. The metaphor of metaphor serves to mediate the two opposite worlds that surround him. Purgation and awakening are inevitable for a hero in combat with enemies in a metaphorical world of lies, suffering, redemption, cruelty and sinfulness.

Sufism is a mystical tradition which emphasises the love of God and teaches that God and the Sufis have a special relationship which goes back to a primordial covenant. The Sufis are friends of God. Sufism also constitutes a path (\textit{tarikat}) which begins with repentance and leads through a number of stations, representing virtues, such as absolute trust in God, to a higher series of ecstatic states (Baldick, 2000). The distinction between the inner and outer worlds in Sufi Islamic teachings is used to ease the mediation process, an essential element in the construction of a moral self. The narrator/mediator/mentor’s efforts to make his son aware of the difference between reality and the facade are based on a rhetorical strategy involving a text responding to other texts, not simply to correct the previous record, but also to persuade the audience to accept the author’s view of the world (Tull, 1999). After confessing his tensions and sufferings to his father, Polat continues to execute his duties, which entail negotiating with lawless members of the world of death and humiliation. Suffering caused by such sacrifices can be compensated for only by maintaining ties with a love-filled spiritual world, which is not only available in worldly relationships but also in otherworldly dealings.

In addition, the epideictic narrative, which praises the telos of human beings through love, is uttered as a manifestation of God. The aesthetic sensitivity created via stories and parables serves to underline the theme of the moral creed, which is prioritised by aestheticising the violence and misdeeds of the gangland leaders whose actions oscillate between sinfulness and purity. The metaphor of God is used as a way of reconciling the tension between the literal plane of meaning (\textit{zahir}) and hidden spiritual essence (\textit{batin}) emphasised in Sufi teachings. Both heroes, Polat and Yusuf, are trapped in the daily routines and misdeeds of the literal plane of meaning, therefore they have to gauge the weight of hidden spiritual essence so as to justify their actions and reflections on events. They need to be continuously reminded of the existence of world of facade, which can be quickly forgotten by those whose actions are justified by the defence of true moral values. Therefore, the stories are reactivated with unprecedented immediacy to keep the hero on the right path.

The righteousness of these parables is buttressed by what Burke (1970) calls a rhetorically ‘perfect’ redemptive drama: a term used by the popular media to gauge our moral progress (Williamson, 2009). According to Burke, the human symbolic system tends toward perfections of its own. Human beings can realise perfection only through its symbolisation, defined by Burke as ‘the finishedness’ or completeness of meaning evoked by a specific symbol or word, the fulfilment of a text’s categorical expectancies (Burke, 1966). The rhetorical perfection achieved through the parables as well as the storyline in these television dramas resembles Burke’s cycle of redemption, which is a condition or situation deeply embedded in religious themes such as suffering, sacrifice, retribution,
purgation and atonement. The stories of these so-called heroes represent atonement through purgation, the sacrifice involved in fighting on behalf of nationhood and the motherland, and the suffering caused by the loss of a normal, comfortable lifestyle, all of which serve to provide a moralistic outlook. The parables which contribute to the theorising of these acts and feelings buttress the rhetorical objective of the dramas: that is, they encourage religious and nationalist sentiment by promoting a sense of communality and a consensus narrative (Thorburn, 1987).

The introduction of parables as a cognitive and affective panacea for resolving the ambivalence of the misdeeds and moral deeds of these characters functions to stylise the narrative itself. These parables are constituted by a whole cluster of meanings ranging from the relationship of a Muslim with God, the inner versus the outer and the nature of genuine faith and love to more elusive choices such as path, light, faith, revelation and wisdom. The parables used in these dramas serve as a rhetorical marker which offers insights by revealing an ‘extraordinary’ transcendent reality within ‘ordinary’ events and actions (Kirkwood, 1985). The parables as metaphors exemplified in this article also impose their own rhetorical authority. This is because the irreducible character of metaphors (Kirkwood, 1985) eliminates the possibility of confrontation and negotiation: two of the most prominent characteristics of media texts. In addition, as Meyer reminds us, religious subjects are created by religious didactics: a process entailing not only a strong emphasis on specific, privileged sensory and extrasensory perceptions, but also the anaesthetization of other senses (Meyer, 2006), which is a linguistic strategy accommodated through the ‘politics of patience’.

Conclusion

In a society in which debates on the re-sacralisation of culture have reached their zenith, a wide range of concepts, issues and queries must be taken into account in the conceptualisation of themes of piety and the media. In Turkey there have been popular debates regarding the place of religious symbols in the public space, the discursive characteristics of conservative politics and culture, the ‘true’ norms deriving from Islamic teachings, the meaning of being a real Muslim, the scope and quality of Islamic teachings in school textbooks, and newly-constructed cultural signifiers which have been coded as both modern and pious. The new public vocabularies which borrow from Islamic teachings have created a new field of investigation in Turkish society. Therefore, the audience of such emanating from a source heralding moral betterment are offered the opportunity to efface themselves through the restored voice of Islam. Rather than employing a structuralist and a deconstructionist methodology, this article has focused particularly on the connection between narrative characteristics and the rhetorical features of television drama.

As a necessary basis for cultural studies (Fornas, 2000), mediation requires an understanding of how literary choices can affect multiple layers of meaning. In order to clarify the workings of narrative and symbolic texts, the current study has emphasised the centrality of the aesthetic perspective on most forms of popular culture, especially forms such as films and television programmes. The most compelling justification for the essentially literary perspectives in the study of fictional television programming is that
this body of drama or narrative relies on conventions or characterisation, plot and especially genre, and therefore employs strategies of editing and camera movement (Thorburn, 1987). Therefore, the power of TV to increase pious sensibilities can be investigated via ‘aesthetic methods of interpretation’ (Thorburn, 1987: 165).

In this article, the ritual of storytelling and the repositioning parables in TV dramas have been interpreted as examples of mediated Islamic piety. Religious stories based on conversational communicative strategies imbue the texts of television drama with poetic mysteriousness. It is argued that the repackaging of narrative genres such as parables, proverbs and aphorisms has allowed the reactivation of pious texts with an unprecedented immediacy. As one of the most common literary feature of dramas, storytelling indicates a tendency towards the creating and recreation of moral exemplary characters, as well as super-subjects. As emphasised previously, self-evaluation or confession is the aim of ritualised storytelling by a character in the role of preacher, adviser and mentor, who is coded as the narrator of religious teaching in the form of parables, stories or proverbs. By incorporating Sufi teachings into their stories, interlocutors take on the status of super-subjects, which in turn reinforces the authority of the hero in these dramas. This phenomenon is described by Öncü as follows:

[T]he super-subject (at least on Turkish television) is not a ‘narrator’ in the classical sense of the term, organising ‘live’ events and orchestrating them toward a particular resolution. He (not she) does not provide narrative resolution but, by his very presence, seems to stabilise the chaos, discord and disorder of the world beyond our immediate experience. (2006: 232)

This leads to a paradox: the aforementioned world of chaos in which the heroes struggle seems to require mediation between the mundane and spiritual worlds, whereas narratives structured through parables inevitably preclude any such negotiation or self-reflection.

The fact that the parable sections of TV drama have been followed by a vast audience reminds us of the very significance of the mediated nature of experiences claimed to be immediate and authentic (Meyer, 2006). The analysis of parables positioned as metaphors in TV drama illustrates the accommodation of didactic teachings into the texts, the use of epideictic genre to create a need for a moral creed, and the role of interlocutors as super-subjects. These elements all recreate a sense of closure of argumentation and negotiation, which are the core features of narratives scripted as vehicles for mental resolutions. These narratives affirm the idea of vitalism related to the conviction that life is sustained in vital sources beyond the rationalistic understanding of humans. These vital forces may have many names including ‘God’, ‘healing power’ and ‘blessed souls’.

This article has presented an evaluation of the revelation of religious piety in the selected dramas, highlighting the increasing importance of storytelling in mediating religious and aesthetic sensitivity. In the media texts discussed, the binary opposition between the literal and spiritual planes of meaning was employed in order to create a consensus on the truthfulness of the selected stories, the ultimate meaning-makers. This consensus is achieved by irreducible metaphors uttered by the mentor in an affective language so as to reiterate moral registers. As rhetorical tools, parables reproduce a priori ultimates implicit in a foundationalist interpretation of morality, a concept which
reflects Thorburn’s (1987) ‘consensus narrative’. Audiences are exposed to the world of television, characterised both as a source of objects of desire, as well as a sphere that compels the decision-making: the parables as metaphors and redemptive lessons derived from these texts do not construct suffering as an entirely subjective category. According to secular redemptive politics, if the world is a dark place that needs redemption, humans must redeem themselves. In other words, the worldly project of redemption requires self-redemption (Asad, 2003), but such a possibility is negated by the narrative structure of the TV dramas. In contrast, the audiences exposed to these dialogised texts are offered a genre which aims to challenge them in such a way as to lead to their improvement, seemingly the outcome of a process whereby the domination of pious sensibilities over political possibilities is glorified in the authoritativeness of the various other narratives surrounding us.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. The television drama Kurtlar Vadisi (Valley of Wolves) has been on the air since 2003. The production company, Pana Film, produced three films which all covered the theme of conspiracy against nationhood and the motherland. Deli Yürek (Crazy Heart) began in 1998 and was on the air for four years. The feature film which was produced after the TV serial ended was entitled: The Crazy Heart: The Hell of Bumerang. The serial has been produced under three different titles: Kurtlar Vadisi (Valley of Wolves) (2003–2005); Kurtlar Vadisi Terör (Valley of Wolves Terror) (2007); Kurtlar Vadisi Pusu (Valley of Wolves Ambush) (2007– ). While the first serial portrayed the struggles between the Mafia leaders, agents of different origins within the framework of a nationalistic discourse; the second and the third serials’ political stance has been different in terms of portraying Mafia and state relationships.

2. His name comes from the well known story of Joseph. Yusuf is believed to have been the 11th son of Jacob and his favourite. Of all of Jacob’s children, Joseph was the one given the gift of prophecy. Joseph is admired as a great preacher of the Islamic faith, who had an extremely strong commitment to God and as one who tried to get people to follow the path of righteousness. In the TV serial, Yusuf also has been struggling to follow the same path.

3. The Bektashi people are accepted as a sub-group of Alevi people in Turkey. Alevism is based on the idea of the importance of inner meaning, rather than the daily rituals of Islam.

4. The role of redemptive politics and teleological discussions about different interpretations on this theme are not included in this article. The position of possible redeemers is not an issue of significance; rather, the rhetorical strategies articulated in TV drama are emphasised.

References


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