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THE DIALECTICS OF HISTORICAL REALITY AND ARTISTIC IMAGINATION: BASED ON YUNIS ORUCOV'S NOVEL "BORALTAN – THE TRAP OF FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the interrelationship between historical reality and artistic imagination based on Yunis Orucov's novel Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom. The primary aim of the study is to determine how historical events are transformed within a literary text and how these transformations contribute to the formation of national memory, ideological thought, and historical consciousness. The article analyzes the historical and political significance of the Boraltan tragedy, its importance in the context of Azerbaijan–Türkiye relations, and the specific ways in which it is represented in the novel. The study demonstrates that, while preserving historical facts, the author reinterprets them through artistic transformation mechanisms such as symbolization, psychological deepening, dramatic interpretation, retrospective memory, and collective memory. The characters of Azer, Araz, and Baycan, as well as Boraltan and the Aras River, become symbols expressing the ideas of national identity, a divided homeland, the aspiration for freedom, and historical justice. In the novel, the Boraltan tragedy is presented not merely as a specific historical event, but also as a generalized representation of the repression, deportation, and political pressure experienced by the Turkic world throughout the twentieth century. Consequently, artistic imagination in the work does not so much distort historical reality as reveal its moral, psychological, and ideological essence. The novel can be regarded as a significant literary example in terms of preserving national memory, reassessing historical events from a contemporary perspective, and strengthening national solidarity.

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Introduction

The historical novel is considered one of the most complex genres in world literature. This genre develops at the intersection of historiography and artistic creativity and incorporates, to a certain extent, the principles of both fields. The fundamental characteristic of the historical novel is the recreation of the past through artistic thought. On the one hand, the author relies on historical facts; on the other hand, by employing the possibilities of artistic imagination, the author interprets these facts within an aesthetic system. For this reason, the relationship between historical reality and artistic imagination is regarded as one of the principal problems in the theory of the historical novel.

Aristotle explained the difference between history and poetry in his *Poetics* as follows: “History deals with events that have occurred, whereas poetry deals with events that may occur. While the historian presents a particular fact, the writer seeks to express a universal truth” (Aristotle, 2006, p. 35). This idea subsequently became one of the fundamental principles of the theory of the historical novel.

In literary theory, historical fact and artistic truth are not regarded as identical concepts. A historical fact is an objective event substantiated by documents. Artistic truth, by contrast, is the artistic truth that expresses the aesthetic and philosophical essence of life. Even when an author makes minor factual changes, the overall historical truth of a work may remain intact. Conversely, even if all facts are presented accurately, a work may lose its credibility if the spirit of the period and human psychology are not adequately reflected. Therefore, for a historical novel, not only factual accuracy but also the authenticity of the historical atmosphere is of particular importance.

The Boraltan tragedy is one of the most dramatic examples in the history of the Turkic world in the twentieth century of the confrontation between political realities and national-moral values. Yunis Orucov’s novel *Boraltan*, or, in its full title, *Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom*, reassesses this historical event on an artistic plane and reflects, through literature, the historical test of the idea of Azerbaijan–Türkiye brotherhood. Alongside its reliance on historical facts, the novel also reconstructs national memory in artistic form.

In his speech in Ankara on 9 December 2020, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan congratulated the Azerbaijani people on their victory in the 44-day war and stated that they had provided all possible support to their brothers sharing a common language, religion, culture, and history, and that they had also “cleansed the stain of the Boraltan tragedy perpetrated by the Republican People’s Party in 1945” (Tahirqızı, 2022, p. 16). The President reiterated the same ideas the following day at the Victory Parade held in Baku. Following this speech, the historical tragedy, which had previously been largely unknown to the wider Azerbaijani public, began to be investigated and studied. Award-winning journalist and writer Yunis Orucov, after learning about these terrible events, decided to write a new work while remaining faithful to the historical facts. At the beginning of the book, the author explains his reason for writing the work as follows: “We—the two brothers, hand in hand—crushed the head of the merciless enemy left behind by that red, thick snake. Thus, we also avenged our compatriots who regarded Türkiye as their homeland and their hope but were murdered as a result of the injustice of political systems. The restless souls of 146 unfortunate Azerbaijanis found peace. By putting this tragedy into writing, I too freed myself from the captivity of emotions that had given me no peace” (Orucov, 2022, p. 7).

In order to evaluate the Boraltan tragedy objectively, it is necessary to interpret the historical and political circumstances of the period from the perspective of realism. One and a half months after the outbreak of the Second World War, Türkiye joined the alliance that included Britain on 19 October 1939. In 1945, during the final months of the war, it remained committed to a policy of non-participation in the war. In the final years of the war, Stalin proposed establishing a system of joint administration over the Turkish Straits. Stalin’s plans were, of course, far from friendly. In March 1945, Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov delivered a note to the Turkish ambassador, thereby revealing the true face of the Soviet Union. Stalin and Molotov attempted to persuade the United States and Britain to accept this position at the Yalta Conference. They also announced that the “Treaty of Friendship and Neutrality,” signed in 1925 and extended for another ten years in 1935, would not be renewed. Following the victory over Hitler, the Stalinist government became increasingly aggressive. İsmet İnönü attempted to resolve the emerging crises on the basis of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s principle of avoiding war with the Russians. The Soviet Union demanded the return of soldiers who had taken refuge in Türkiye during the war. The issue of returning the émigrés was a sensitive one. İsmet İnönü, who had succeeded in keeping Türkiye away from the war, did not wish to confront Stalin over the émigré issue. It may be argued that the émigrés were sacrificed in order to preserve control over Türkiye and the Straits.

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To fully understand the work, it is necessary to approach the social, political, and historical events of the period carefully and sensitively. First of all, various views have been expressed regarding the location where the Boraltan tragedy occurred. There is a Boralan Bridge over the Aras River on the Türkiye–Iran border, which apparently later became known as Boraltan in oral usage. The tragedy could not have taken place there for two reasons: documents indicate that the émigrés were transported by train to the border, whereas there was no railway line in that area in the 1940s; moreover, an exchange with Soviet soldiers on the Iran–Türkiye border would be illogical. In the novel, too, based on historical documents, the tragedy of our compatriots is depicted as having taken place at the Tiknis border crossing on the Türkiye–USSR frontier in Kars. After reading the novel, one arrives at the conclusion that Azerbaijanis who endured immense hardship in order to cross into Türkiye most likely passed through the Boralan Plateau before reaching the land they regarded as their second homeland. In memory of these hardships and interrupted lives, Boralan entered history as "Boraltan." Turkish researcher İsmail Köse explains the reason for the lack of accurate information as follows: "Moreover, the public disclosure of such an action would have caused reactions. The return had to be carried out secretly, with all security measures taken. Therefore, strict censorship was imposed during and after the return. The censorship prevented a reliable flow of information about the process and, in later years, led to the emergence of numerous sensational and controversial accounts concerning the return, as well as to the reporting of events that had never actually occurred" (Köse, 2016, p. 153).

In the novel, which consists of seven parts, the writer takes us on a journey through different periods of the twentieth century and sheds light not only on the Boraltan tragedy but also on numerous political events in Türkiye and around the world. The author succeeds in presenting historical reality to the reader through various transformations. In *Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom*, Yunis Orucov constructs the mechanisms of artistic transformation through the symbolization, psychological deepening, and dramatic interpretation of historical reality.

In the novel, Azerbaijan–Türkiye relations are presented not merely on a political or diplomatic level, but within the context of ethnic, linguistic, cultural, and spiritual unity. By connecting Turkish identity with a common destiny, common memory, and common tragedy, the author reveals the historical roots of the idea of "one nation, two states" through artistic characters. The author has also given the characters symbolic and meaningful names. The principal protagonists of the work are two young men named Azer and Araz. These characters are artistic prototypes of Ənvər Qazıyev and Adəm Qardaşbəyli. Azer names his son Baycan. In this way, Yunis Orucov expresses his aspiration to see Azerbaijan as a whole. He associates the suffering caused by the Aras River—which constitutes a natural border dividing a people into two parts—with the tragic fate of the character Araz.

Baycan, who loses his father several months after his birth, spends his entire life searching for him and living with his longing. Against the background of the journalist Baycan's activities, Y. Orucov draws attention to the right-wing–left-wing conflicts that occurred in Türkiye in 1978 and depicts how external interventions led to civil conflict. "What were these people, who did not even know what right-wing or left-wing politics meant, fighting over? Did they think I was getting involved in political issues and taking politicians' bread out of their hands? It was in vain. Politics was not their business, and perhaps they knew that. Unfortunately, however, those who shaped the country's agenda had turned them into instruments of their own games. Just as a bear has a thousand tricks for the sake of a single pear, the people bore the consequences of every political problem. The path to gaining office also passed through ideological struggle" (Orucov, 2022, p. 23).

Baycan, who is called "the son of a traitor to the homeland," becomes increasingly interested in learning what happened to his father, and these searches cause him considerable psychological distress. In describing Azer's life, the writer, through artistic imagination, takes the character to the freezing steppes of Kazakhstan, where the real-life protagonists had never been. The destruction of the Azerbaijani

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intelligentsia and the bloodthirsty nature of the Stalinist regime are conveyed to the reader through powerful imagery. Azer and his sister Alangu live a happy life with their father, a prosecutor, and their mother, a scholar. However, repression eventually reaches their door as well. The parents of the family exiled to Kazakhstan die shortly afterwards as a result of the harsh conditions. Alangu is subjected to sexual violence, while only Azer is able to escape from this hell with his friend Araz, whom he meets there, and seek refuge in Türkiye. The writer describes the end of this difficult journey as follows: "When the Turkish border guards found them, both embraced the dry earth on which they had collapsed as though dead, laughing and crying with joy. Boraltan had opened its arms as their last place of hope and embraced them both... Yet it never occurred to them that this border which had welcomed them would one day become the starting point of the disaster that awaited them" (Orucov, 2022, p. 125).

The hopeful attitude of Azerbaijanis and other émigrés who sought refuge in Boraltan toward Türkiye increases the emotional burden of the idea of brotherhood in the novel. This hope is characterized by the perception of Türkiye as the "last refuge" for the Turkic world. However, the development of events demonstrates that this idea is shaken in the face of historical reality. The central dramatic line of the novel is constructed around the damage inflicted upon Azerbaijan–Türkiye brotherhood by political necessities. The Boraltan event is presented not merely as an act of physical destruction, but also as a point of moral rupture. The author does not portray Türkiye as an enemy; rather, he presents it as a state making decisions under international pressure while nevertheless bearing historical responsibility for those decisions.

It should be noted that the author does not merely recall the suffering inflicted upon the Azerbaijani people; the Holodomor genocide perpetrated by Stalin in Ukraine, as well as the tragedies of the Meskhetian Turks and Crimean Tatars, are also reflected in the novel. "From afar, at first glance, Crimea appeared cheerful, yet it was overflowing with sorrow within. The grief of the swallow's nest, the White Mosque, and Bakhchysarai seemed to pour from its face. It was as though the city itself had found a voice and was calling out to its native people—the people who had built it, created it, and breathed life into it, its true owners. The Bolsheviks' collectivization policy had resulted in the mass destruction of the Crimean Tatars. Most of the wealthy Tatars had been deported to the Urals and Siberia. Thousands of people had died of hunger. At the same time, the repression that began in the USSR sent Crimean Tatars, including hundreds of intellectuals, on a journey from which there was no return" (Orucov, 2022, p. 59).

One of the most important ideological functions of the historical novel is the formation and strengthening of national identity. When selecting historical events, bringing certain protagonists to the foreground, and evaluating events, the author foregrounds national ideals that are significant for society. Historical figures are presented not only as representatives of a particular historical period but also as symbols of the moral values of the nation, the idea of freedom, patriotism, and national solidarity. Yunis Orucov also employs this ideology in his historical novel. In *Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom*, the image of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk is depicted with grandeur and magnificence. The people's trust in and love for him, his sacrifices for his homeland, and his political foresight transform him from a real historical figure into something closer to a national hero and an ideologue of a people. İsmet İnönü and Şükrü Saracoğlu are portrayed as historical figures while simultaneously being represented as characters in whom historical reality and imagination converge: they find themselves in an impasse in the face of historical events and, while considering their own compatriots, make an erroneous historical decision against their Azerbaijani brothers. Through the figures of Stalin and Molotov, the author also artistically reveals the true faces of cruel and oppressive rulers who sought to make the national identities and collective memories of occupied peoples disappear, yet ultimately failed, as history delivered its due response to them.

One of the transformations employed in the work is the representation of collective memory through characters and the mechanism of retrospective memory. In *Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom*, alongside Azer and Araz, the author artistically recreates the shared fate of 146 unfortunate Azerbaijanis. Within this collective memory, it is possible to observe the pain and suffering of repression, as well as the

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tragic fate once again experienced by people who had sought refuge in a brotherly country and found at least a measure of comfort there. Y. Orucov employs this method across two generations. Araz and Azer are shot, while their children, Baycan and Səhər, represent a generation that carries on its shoulders the burden of orphanhood, difficult times, and the suffering of tearful mothers. Although the author depicts the members of a generation that began with happiness within a series of painful and difficult historical events, he concludes the narrative with hope and moments of happiness: "Thus, the hopes caught in Boraltan's barbed wire turned into winged dreams and flew into the vastness of the blue sky. It was as though the song of freedom was being played everywhere. The witness who had mourned for years over the murder of innocent people finally removed its garment of mourning and caressed Baycan's faithful heart. The wild winds, trembling with joy, scattered everywhere the soil he had brought from his ancestral homeland. The scent of the homeland filled the air" (Orucov, 2022, p. 214).

An important function of the dialectical relationship between artistic imagination and historical reality is the reassessment of historical events from the perspective of the contemporary period. Y. Orucov also connects the conclusion of his work with the present day and sheds light on certain aspects of the genetic code and historical memory of the philosophy of "one nation, two states." The author also presents a contemporary perspective on the Boraltan tragedy through Baycan's voice: "If İnönü had not handed the émigrés over to the Soviets, would Stalin have done anything to Türkiye? – He could not have done anything. I swear to God, nothing. This can also be seen clearly when the events are analyzed. It was simply Stalin's threat that worked, and by handing 195 émigrés over to the Soviets, the CHP government dealt a major blow to Türkiye's prestige and stained its history" (Orucov, 2022, p. 209).

Although the historical novel is written about the past, in reality the author also expresses an attitude toward the problems of his own time. Through the historical plot, current issues such as freedom, statehood, national unity, social justice, independence, and human rights are discussed indirectly. Thus, historical reality becomes a means of expressing a contemporary ideological discourse and establishes a moral connection between the past and the present.

The unity of historical reality and artistic imagination can also perform a legitimizing function. In different periods, historical novels have been used to substantiate state ideology, political authority, or national ideals. By presenting historical events from a particular perspective, a writer can support or criticize a specific political or moral position.

The novel *Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom* presents the historical tragedy as an element of collective national memory. Here, the tragedy is not merely a painful memory of the past; it also performs the function of a lesson for future generations. Yunis Orucov's artistic strategy is based on presenting national trauma without creating a discourse of hostility. This transforms the novel into one of the reconciling and thought-provoking examples of literature in the Turkic world.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that, in the historical novel genre, the interaction between historical reality and artistic imagination is not limited merely to the artistic presentation of facts. This relationship functions as a complex artistic mechanism serving to reinterpret historical events aesthetically and to interpret them within the context of national memory and social consciousness. The principal value of the historical novel lies not in reproducing the chronological sequence of facts but in revealing the moral, psychological, and ideological essence of history through artistic means. From this perspective, Yunis Orucov's novel *Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom* can be regarded as a successful example of transforming historically documented events, through artistic means, into an integral part of national memory.

The study establishes that the author presents the Boraltan tragedy not merely as a specific historical event, but as a symbol of the political pressures, repression, forced migrations, and national tragedies experienced by the Turkic world throughout the twentieth century. The artistic structure of the novel enables the Boraltan event to be presented within a broader historical context and brings together the

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tragedies that occurred in different geographical areas, including Azerbaijan, Crimea, Ahıska, and Ukraine, on the common plane of historical memory. Thus, individual destinies become an artistic expression of a national and pan-Turkic destiny and contribute to the formation of collective memory.

The research demonstrates that one of the principal artistic strengths of the novel lies in the presentation of historical reality through various mechanisms of transformation. Artistic devices such as symbolization, psychological deepening, dramatic interpretation, retrospective memory, the collective memory model, and idealization enable the author to intensify the emotional impact of historical facts. The Boraltan border, the Aras River, and the characters of Azer, Araz, and Baycan are not merely participants in the plot; they are multilayered symbols expressing the ideas of national identity, a divided homeland, the aspiration for freedom, and historical justice. From this perspective, artistic imagination does not distort historical truth; rather, it reveals its moral content more clearly.

The analysis demonstrates that Yunis Orucov attempts to avoid one-sided judgment in his presentation of historical figures and political events. The Turkish leadership is presented in the novel as an actor making decisions under the influence of historical circumstances, international political pressure, and geopolitical realities. At the same time, the author does not conceal the moral trauma that this decision caused in national memory. Such an approach not only strengthens the ideological dimension of the work but also allows historical events to be evaluated not solely on an emotional level but also from an objective political perspective. Rather than creating rhetoric of hostility, the novel calls for an understanding of the causes of the historical tragedy and for drawing lessons from it.

One of the significant findings of the study is that, in the novel *Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom*, historical reality is organically connected with the national ideological discourse of the contemporary period. The author interprets past events against the background of the historical roots of contemporary Azerbaijan–Türkiye relations and seeks to demonstrate that the philosophy of “one nation, two states” is not merely a political concept but the outcome of a common historical memory formed over centuries. Thus, the historical novel does not remain merely an artistic representation of the past; it also becomes an ideological-aesthetic instrument contributing to the formation of contemporary national identity and moral values.

The study also confirms that Yunis Orucov’s approach to historical events is based on establishing a successful balance between historical documents and artistic imagination. The author does not seek to alter historical facts; rather, by expanding their emotional, psychological, and moral dimensions, he enables the reader to comprehend historical events more deeply. This demonstrates the successful fulfillment of one of the principal functions of the historical novel: the formation of historical consciousness and the preservation of national memory.

Ultimately, *Boraltan – The Trap of Freedom* is one of the successful examples of contemporary Azerbaijani historical fiction that realizes the unity of historical reality and artistic imagination at a high aesthetic level. The work is not merely an artistic chronicle of the Boraltan tragedy; it also serves as an important literary text transmitting the common historical memory of the Turkic world, national solidarity, and the idea of freedom to future generations. The findings of the study demonstrate that the artistic transformation mechanisms employed by Yunis Orucov not only deepen the aesthetic understanding of historical events but also enable their reassessment within the social, ideological, and cultural context of the contemporary period. In this respect, the novel may be regarded as significant scholarly material both for studying the development of Azerbaijani historical fiction and for examining the theoretical dimensions of the relationship between historical reality and artistic imagination.

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