



The Artistic System Of Images In L. N. Tolstoy's Novella «Hadji Murat»

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the specific features of the system of images in L. N. Tolstoy's novella «Hadji Murat». Particular attention is given to the image of Hadji Murat as a "liminal" hero who finds himself caught between two forces and compelled to act within a political trap. The study also considers the role of landscape and material details as active meaning-making elements, including the symbolism of the frame composition (the thistle motif), which intensifies the tragic ending.

Keywords:

System of images, artistic world, character system, motif of wandering, pilgrimage, road motif.

«Hadji Murat» is among L. N. Tolstoy's most compositionally concise yet semantically multilayered works. The author largely refrains from overt publicistic commentary and abstract reflection, constructing the narrative as a dense interaction of artistic images: character types, portrait descriptions, everyday and material details, landscape sketches, symbolic motifs, and framing compositional elements. The integrity of the novella's artistic world is achieved insofar as its system of images is built not around a romanticized "central" protagonist, but around the confrontation of value-based and cultural worlds, revealed through a network of contrasts, parallels, and semantically charged details.

The hero's fate is closely linked to the idea of loss-the loss of home-and, consequently, to the motif of the road, to hopeless and desperate attempts to find one's own place in the world. Throughout the work runs the idea of "home" as a haven, a hearth, a shelter. This is not incidental. Hadji Murat's life is marked by a constant search for precisely such refuge, a "spiritual sanctuary." He belongs to the category of people who struggle incessantly and continually seek justice-often in vain. Yet they

never lose their dignity or courage and do not retreat even in the face of the threat of their own death [3].

One of the most persistent motifs in the "Caucasian" texts of Russian literature is the motif of wandering. It may function merely as an aspect of individual works, serving as a structural link in their composition, or it may become a defining feature of entire genres (for example, the Romantic narrative poem) [2].

A plot structured around the motif of wandering can be readily identified not only in the works of L. N. Tolstoy, but also in those of A. Pushkin, A. Polezhaev, A. Bestuzhev-Marlinsky, A. Shishkov, V. Dal, and M. Gorky-that is, in the writings of virtually all Russian authors who addressed the theme of the Caucasus. In other words, within the Caucasian space, the wanderer is a highly symbolic figure.

It is also important to distinguish between the concepts of "pilgrimage/wayfaring" (*strannichestvo*) and "wandering" (*skitalchestvo*). *Strannichestvo* is, ultimately, a voluntary choice made by an individual, regardless of the circumstances that may have led to it. Moreover, *strannichestvo* typically presupposes the existence of a home or refuge

to which one can always return. By contrast, *skitalchestvo* rarely implies a favorable return to one's native hearth. In this case, voluntariness interacts with the idea of an inescapable, hostile fate, with the latter predominating [4].

In the early years of his literary career, Tolstoy expressed a negative attitude toward metaphorical descriptions of natural phenomena. Nevertheless, the "blending of natural phenomena with manifestations of the human soul" occurs in Tolstoy's writing more than once. The language of his works is closely connected with his worldview. In the structure of the novella *Hadji Murat*, the image-symbol of meadowsweet (*tavolga*) acquires particular significance [1].

The system of images in a literary work is understood as a set of interrelated artistic images (characters, spatial and landscape components, recurring motifs, and material details) that function within a unified semantic field and serve to раскрыть the central idea of the text. In *Hadji Murat*, this system is organized according to the principle of a "double mirror": the key conflict between the individual and authority, between lived human experience and impersonal historical necessity, is reflected across different spaces and narrative nodes. Tolstoy deliberately avoids one-dimensional glorification or demonization of his characters; therefore, the novella's artistic design relies, first, on contrasts (the Caucasus and the metropolitan "center," "living" nature and "dead" bureaucratic regulation, personal honor and state expediency); second, on a parallel depiction of different forms of power; third, on a symbolically significant detail that functions as a semantic "commentary" on events; and, finally, on an effect of documentariness-precision of description, restraint of authorial tone, and an emphatically factual, "hard-edged" narrative manner.

Tolstoy presents the central figure of *Hadji Murat* not as a legendary character or a Romantic hero, but as a man living on the boundary between two systems and compelled to act within a historical and political trap. His inner profile is shaped at the intersection of several forces: the traditional code of highland honor, personal dignity, and loyalty to his own

people; the pragmatic necessity of political maneuvering (negotiations, defections, and the risk of being accused of treason); and a deeply personal motivation linked above all to the fate of his family and the theme of hostage-taking. Tolstoy reveals the protagonist's character through psychological concreteness-habits, manner of speech, patterns of response to threat and humiliation, and behavioral composure. This concreteness underscores the image's central tragic dominant: the incompatibility between an individual striving to remain an autonomous decision-maker and the mechanism of the "historical machine," which turns a person into a means to an end. *Hadji Murat* is significant not as an "ideal" hero, but as a bearer of inner tension: outward restraint and rationality coexist in him with a sense of doom and constant danger.

An important component of the novella's system of images is formed by the Russian officers and the "middle world" of everyday military routine. Tolstoy deliberately avoids constructing the text around a simplistic opposition between the "bad" and the "good"; instead, he introduces a group of Russian characters in whom the duality of imperial existence becomes clearly visible. On the one hand, they display a capacity for empathy, everyday humaneness, and a culture of communication; on the other, they are governed by service logic and a habituation to violence as a "normal" condition of war.

In the episodes involving the officers, Tolstoy's irony is particularly evident: the official "elevated" language diverges sharply from actual practice. In private life, music, conversation, and a sense of domesticity persist, while the sphere of orders is ruled by a cold mechanical logic. This "double-textured" portrayal lends the artistic world depth: tragedy emerges not from caricatured evil, but from the ordinariness of violence that has become part of the established order.

The Caucasian setting and the natural world in the novella perform not a decorative, but a meaning-making function. For Tolstoy, nature operates as an active "image-commentary" that intensifies the sense of life's value while simultaneously underscoring the unnaturalness

of destruction. The Caucasus is depicted as a space of intense, powerful vitality-rendered through tangible texture, sharp smells, changes in terrain, and the dynamics of movement. In this context, death and cruelty are perceived not as a “heroic episode,” but as a moral rupture.

A special role is played by the symbol of the thistle (burdock), which is tied to the work’s framing composition: at the beginning it is alive, resilient, and resistant; in the finale it is broken and crushed. This image symbolically condenses Hadji Murat’s fate-steadfastness, a “prickly” life force, resistance to pressure, and at the same time the inevitability of being destroyed by the “roller” of historical power. Owing to the bodily, tactile concreteness of the detail, the ending is perceived not only as a plot resolution, but also as the closure of a symbolic circle.

The specificity of Tolstoy’s system of images is also evident in the special status of the “small thing”-the material detail and the recurring motif. Clothing, weapons, gestures, everyday scenes, and rituals of power (receptions, reports, intonation) function not as neutral descriptive elements but as signs of values and indicators of the system’s depersonalizing nature. Recurring motifs (captivity and hostages, waiting, negotiations, the road and flight) create the effect of a closed space: the protagonist is in constant motion, yet this dynamism is governed by a sense of circularity and the inevitability of events. Thus, the tragedy of the novella is determined not only by its plot, but also by the very structure of its imagery.

The authorial stance in «Hadji Murat» is conveyed through external restraint and a “chronicle-like” narrative manner. Tolstoy avoids direct evaluations; however, the consistent presentation of facts-from an order to a gunshot, from ambition to a shattered family life-intensifies the work’s moral impact. Within the novella’s artistic world there is no simplified morality in the vein of “who is right”; instead, there is an axiological center: human life and the life of nature are experienced as unconditional values, whereas any form of power that turns people into a means appears as a tragic distortion.

Thus, the specificity of the system of images in «Hadji Murat» lies in the creation of a multilayered network of mirrors, contrasts, and symbolically charged details. As a result, «Hadji Murat» is perceived not only as a military and biographical narrative, but also as an artistically constructed system of images demonstrating that the most acute conflict unfolds not between peoples, but between living human existence and the impersonal logic of power.

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