

ABSENCE OF "WAR" IN MODERN TURKISH LITERATURE

Modern Türk Edebiyatında Savaş Temasının Eksikliği ¹

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ABSTRACT

The presence of war as a theme in Turkish literature, has been a controversial issue for a long time. In some articles, scholars have argued that Turkish literature is very rich in terms of the subject of "war," while others have opposed this idea, and that there is almost no "war theme" in these works of literature. After examining these two opposite opinions and their arguments, one can reach the conclusion that although Turkish history is very rich in terms of wars, this is not reflected in literature, as it should be. This does not mean, however, that Turkish literature does not have any material that deals with this subject. Inevitably, wars are mentioned in Turkish literature, but compare to other national literatures, such as Western or American literature, or even the literatures of Israel or Palestine, this reference is small in number. In those literatures, there are numerous books on the theme of "war" and its sub-categories. Among these sub-categories are war and gender, war and children, rape as a weapon of war, war and nationalism, war and masculinity, war and diaspora, war and migration, war and trauma, war and disabilities, etc. In examining Turkish literature, what we realize is that the themes of the works on war are generally around the theme of "war and nationalism." This paper discusses the main reasons for the lack works on a variety of war themes in this literature especially during the early period of the Republic of Turkey.

Key Words: Theme of "war" in literature, war literature, Modern Turkish Literature, war and nationalism.

ÖZET

Türk edebiyatında savaş konusunun yeterince ele alınıp alınmaması uzun süre tartışma konusu olmuş ve birçok düşünür farklı fikirler öne sürmüşlerdir. Bunlar arasında Türk edebiyatının 'savaş' teması bakımından oldukça zengin olduğunu savunanların yanı sıra bu konunun hiç ele alınmadığını iddia edenler de olmuştur. Bu iki farklı görüş incelendikten sonra şu sonuç çıkarılabilir: Türk tarihi savaşlar bakımından çok zengin olmasına rağmen, bu durum umulanın aksine Türk edebiyatına oldukça az yansıtılmıştır. Bu, Türk edebiyatında savaş ile ilgili herhangi bir ürün olmadığı anlamına gelmemelidir. Fakat, Batılı ya da Amerikan edebiyatı ile, hatta İsrail veya Filistin edebiyatları ile karşılaştırıldığında bu konunun oldukça az işlendiği göze çarpar. Sözü geçen edebiyatlarda savaş ve savaşın alt kategorilerini (savaş ve cinsiyet, savaş ve çocuk, bir savaş silahı olarak tecavüz, savaş ve milliyetçilik, savaş ve erkeklik, savaş ve diaspora, savaş ve göç, savaş ve travma, savaş ve engelli bireyler, savaş ve kadın, v.s) konu edinen çok sayıda kitap bulunmaktadır. Ancak Türk edebiyatı incelendiğinde, eserlerin genellikle "savaş ve milliyetçilik" teması etrafında şekillendiği görülür. Bu çalışmada özellikle erken dönem modern Türk edebiyatında savaş ve alt kategorideki temaların eksikliğinin temel nedenleri tartışılacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edebiyatta 'savaş' teması, savaş edebiyatı, Modern Türk Edebiyatı, savaş ve milliyetçilik.

1.INTRODUCTION

Wars are more than military confrontations made at the fronts. In addition to victories and defeats, suffering, persecution, migration, and mortality affect people deeply. Literature, on the other hand, is the product of those who are affected by events and can express this influence in writing. For this reason, there is an inevitable bond between war and literature. This relationship, however, the presence of war as a theme in Turkish literature, has been a controversial issue for a long time. In some articles, scholars have argued that Turkish literature is very rich in terms of the subject of "war," while others have opposed this idea, and that there is almost no "war theme" in these works of literature. After examining these two opposite opinions and their arguments, one can reach the conclusion that although Turkish history is very rich in terms of wars, this is not reflected in literature, as it should be.

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This does not mean, however, that Turkish literature does not have any material that deals with this subject. Inevitably, wars are mentioned in Turkish literature, but compare to other national literatures, such as Western or American literature, or even the literatures of Israel or Palestine, this reference is small in number. In those literatures, there are numerous books on the theme of “war” and its sub-categories. Among these sub-categories are war and gender, war and children, rape as a weapon of war, war and nationalism, war and masculinity, war and diaspora, war and migration, war and trauma, war and disabilities, etc. In examining Turkish literature, what we realize is that the themes of the works on war are generally around the theme of “war and nationalism.” In this paper, the main reasons for the lack works on a variety of war themes in this literature especially during the early period of the Republic of Turkey are examined. Then, in conclusion common themes of war in the contemporary Turkish literature are discussed.

Turkish history is very rich in terms of wars including Balkan, Trablusgarp, and World War I. However, after reviewing all these wars, we are unexpectedly reminded of an absence of “war” in Turkish literature, especially compared to European, American, or even Palestinian literatures. Very little discussion on the subject of war is featured, which seems curious given the numerous wars in which the nation has been engaged. This is even stranger when we compare it to American, or European literatures and the history of the nation in terms of wars.

Scholars have a variety of opinions concerning this question. The first and most important factor seems to be the ‘memory’ and ‘identity politics’ of the new Turkish state. Before explaining what I mean by the memory and the identity politics of the state, it is useful to give a brief historical background about this period.

By the start of the twentieth century, the Ottoman Empire was in decline and would not ultimately survive the aftermath of World War One. At the beginning of the century, its territory consisted of Asia Minor, parts of the Balkans, and parts of the Middle East. Sultan Abdulhamid found modernization and reforms necessary to increase his internal control of the empire and make it more responsive to external events. For example, he introduced the telegraph and built railroads. However, he was also internally repressive and in 1908 and 1909 the Committee for Union and Progress, also known as the “Young Turks,” revolted and took over the Ottoman government with their own agenda of nationalism and modernization. They forced the sultan to restore the constitution and the parliament, which he had introduced and then abolished. They also granted women more rights, including the option to attend schools. (Britannica, accessed in 2021)

After the start of the Great War in 1914, the Ottomans stayed out of the conflict until 1915, when fear of Russia, which was in the Allied camp, led them to enter the war on the side of Germany and Austria-Hungary’s side. Its participation in World War One would lead to its own demise. (Britannica, accessed in 2021)

After the end of World War One, the Ottoman government was very weak and the Allied forces held large portions of Ottoman territory. Although the government signed the Treaty of Sèvres, the Ottoman parliament refused to ratify it. The Supreme Allied Council invited the Greeks “to restore order in Anatolia.” Although the Greek forces marched into Anatolia, they had not counted on the influence of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk. (Britannica, accessed in 2021)

In recent years, Kemal Pasha had emerged as the leader of a Turkish national movement whose goal was to create a Turkish national republic and a modern, secular society. The presence of foreign invaders catalyzed this movement and by 1922, the Turkish War of Independence had expelled the Greek army from Turkey. The Treaty of Sèvres was replaced by the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923, over whose terms the Turkish government had more say. (Britannica, accessed in 2021)

The sultanate was abolished in 1922 and the Turkish Republic was founded in 1923, followed by a number of significant reforms. For example, the republic’s constitution made primary education free and compulsory, which was important because 90% of the population was illiterate in 1923. In 1924 the religious courts were abolished and in 1928, Turkey officially became a secular state. Women’s suffrage began in 1934. (Britannica, accessed in 2021)

Inevitably, all of these developments have been reflected in literature, too, by direct manipulation or not. The literary output of the era was essentially the continuation of a project to build a national culture for the new nation-state. Turkey had been literally reborn from the ashes of the Ottoman collapse, as a



westernizing, modernizing, essentially Jacobian nation-state. “The republic had come into existence fully grown and armed with no organic antecedents, and therefore lacking a past, but basing itself on the eternally existing Turkish people. The fact that both the spoken and, more fundamentally, the written language were transformed, and the script changed from Arabic to Latin, meant that historical memory became excessively difficult to maintain.” (Eissenstat, 2003) Thus, “literary nationalists were busy creating national culture by interpreting the events of the time, while at the same time fighting the representatives of other ideologies.” (Eissenstat, 2003)

To create a unified Turkish nation, and to have a common identity, the state used literature very effectively in this period. As John Petrovato states “the way in which events are selected for national popular memory is not politically neutral or objective process. The way that the past is represented in public memorials is informed by contemporary concerns, so that the history that is written is often from a statist class, or conservative tradition encourages public memory to support a nationalist enterprise.” (Petrovato, 2008). He quotes Eviatar Zerubavel, saying that “acquiring a group’s memories and thereby identifying with its collective past is part of the process of acquiring any social identity, and familiarizing members with that past is major part of communities efforts to assimilate it. Most of the governments and their defenders create their own preferred realities and narratives of the past. Nations and the states are in the business of fabricating myths and stories of their origins, victories, and triumphs while eliminating the defeats and failures or mass murders.” (Petrovato, 2008) Zerubavel’s observation perfectly describes the very situation of Turkish literature during the beginning of the 20th century.

During the beginning of the 20th century, hundreds of thousands of people were physically wounded and psychologically traumatized. Most families lost their male members. Soldiers came home having witnessed horrible stories of mass murders and were traumatized. Poverty and ignorance were the norm in underdeveloped and impoverished Anatolia. Generally, modern and idealistic young people stood at the forefront. They enthusiastically went to Anatolia with the aim of enlightening the people. Eventually they became successful and reached their goals. This is generally the plot of the Turkish literary works written during this period. For example, one of Halide Edip’s novel deals with love, nationalism, the case of War of Independence, and the hard conditions of Anatolia. Halide Edip portrays a female character, Aliye, who changes the destiny of a town, in a deeper sense the fate of her country. Aliye goes to town as a young, female teacher. In the following days of her arrival the people of the town are uncomfortable with the modern appearance of her especially her being unveiled. Therefore, Aliye is singled out. However, The people of the town’s hostile attitudes change when they understand her being in the town to help children. Haci Fettah, the imam of the town, fell in love with Aliye. When he understood that Aliye would not marry him, he routes the enemy into the town. With a brilliant plan, Aliye managed to save the people of the town, but she could not escape from a cruel death. (Adivar, 2002).

As it is clear in the example, after reading a novel from this era, the reader is left with hatred toward the village imam, while feeling a great appreciation toward these modern and idealist young people. All of these literary works, therefore, are not pieces of literature, but also among the most effective tools of politics of nation building in that era.

Inevitably, this policy was not limited to themes of the stories. Colak states that during the formative years of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk’s republic, an effective tool was commissioning literary works that were in line with the state’s new policy while banning those that did not comply with the founding principles of the new Turkish state. (Colak, 2004) In fact, the first censorship by the state in Turkey’s history is made during this early period of the republic. Namik Kemal’s novel “Son Pismanlik” (The Final Remorse) was retitled as “Intibah” (Resurgence) by the censorship committee.

The state’s interference in literature during the early years of the Turkish Republic needed to establish a Turkish nation and Kemalist principles as well as to create a common memory and identity for the nation. One of the most striking examples from the classics of Turkish literary works in this period is the novel “Calikusu” (The Wren) by Resat Nuri Guntekin. Guntekin wrote his novel in 1922. In 1935 the fifth edition of the book was published, but in this version there was a number of changes. The novel’s fifth edition in 1935 was modified, and some parts were omitted entirely. Unlike previous editions, in the new version, the expressions or the facts, which gave the reader positive impressions about the period, were either omitted entirely, or changed with the ones that had the opposite meanings. Calikusu (Wren) in the old form is considered as the document of historical and the social conditions of the period. However, changes, made

in the fifth edition, prove that the slightest sympathy for the past is intolerable for the new nation-state. For example, at one point, Feride, speaking of the houses in the village of Zeyniler, said that these houses resembled the old houses with boat shed in Bosphorus. However, in the new version, Feride filled with hatred against the scene, which she saw, and she resembled them to ruin shieling that twisted from one side to another, rotted because of the rain, and cobwebbed. (Guntekin, 2007). Also, it was written in Latin script instead of its first four editions that were printed in Arabic script in order to create an appropriate representation of the period.

Another important example is the work of Halide Edip Adivar. Her memoir “The Turkish Ordeal” was published in Britain in 1928. Its Turkish version was published 34 years after she wrote its English version. Adivar says in its preface that the Turkish version is not the direct translation of the English. These two versions are not similar in length. English version is 95 pages longer than the Turkish one. Most of the criticisms directed to Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and the myths regarding the foundation of the state are left out in the second book.

This situation regarding the Halide Edip Adivar was not a direct manipulation, but rather a pressure she and most of the authors felt, possibly continue to feel today, during this period. She did not write her memoirs, which covers the end of the Ottoman Empire and beginning of the Turkish Republic, in Turkish openly and did not translate into Turkish directly because, as Murat Belge states, she would immediately be branded as “enemy of Ataturk”, and her life would be very difficult even if she was the one who worked closely with Mustafa Kemal Ataturk during an earlier era. Also, although Halide Edip Adivar generally touched upon the women issues in her works and becomes the voice of the Turkish women, she, as well as other writers, generally did not tell the stories about the raping and killing women in her novels. Usually, Turkish women were declared as a war hero in novels. They carry bullets to the front, or become responsible for the family, while men are waging war at the fronts. However, almost any novel either mentions a Turkish woman who is raped or tortured as touching on her honor, or the result is committing suicide at the end. Because in a Muslim society, the worst thing that can happen to a woman is to be raped even if this occurs during the war as the strategy of enemy, it is very difficult to accept that women were raped. For this reason, women who were raped and suffered or killed because of raping has not been reflected in novels, and Turkish literature, in general.

During this period, there were other writers who had no chance of publishing their works, particularly their memoirs. Ugur Umit Ungor gives a number of examples from Armenians whose works were prohibited from entering Turkey for containing very harmful ideas such as the memoirs of Karabet Tapikyan or the memoirs of Marie Sarrafian Banker. Another example given by Ungor is the memoirs of Arman Aroosh which entitled as “The History of Ruined City: Urfa”. He states that this work was denied entering to Turkey and existing copies that had found their way into country were confiscated. (Ungor, 2011)

Whether this interference of the state in literature damaged its identity or was it the right way to construct a common memory by deconstructing past memory is still an important question and a debated issue. However, it has caused the authors not to produce materials on the subject of war. It can also be claimed that the new Republic did not want any more animosity from the neighbors or from the world. The schoolbooks, for example, did not talk about the Greeks, but talk about “the enemy;” also the killings and torture that the Muslim Ottomans suffered in the Balkans and the Caucasus are not mentioned.

Another reason for being lack of materials in Turkish literature on the subject of “war” is the neglect of intelligentsia during this period. The literacy rate during this period was very low, no more than ten percent. Also, there was a gap between written and spoken language as well as intelligentsia and ordinary people. As Haluk Harun Duman and Salih Koralp Guresir state, as long as the gap between the intellectuals and ordinary people, goes on, and the intelligentsia does not know the language, the moral qualities and the preferences of these ordinary people, war literature cannot come into being. Intellectuals during the times of war did not attend the battles. However, they were asked to produce on this subject. In fact, some of the works written at the time could not survive, because their artificiality. (Duman and Guresir, 2009)

Peyami Safa describes Turkish war literature as “tamtakir” (absolutely empty). (Safa, 1941). He claims two reasons as the causes of this situation. First reason is the unwillingness of intellectuals to go to war. Second reason is the soldiers who did not write what happened although they lived it. (Safa,1941). At this point, Nuriye Akman indicates another point referring to the literacy rate during this period. She states that during the war English and French soldiers wrote their letters by themselves while there were only one or

two literate soldiers in a Turkish troop who wrote all the letters. Families did not know how to write and read, either. Therefore, we could not have the written documents belonging to this period. (Akman, 2011) In addition to low literacy rate during this period, there was a debated issue among the intellectuals whether “art is for art’s sake” or “art is for people”. While some writers thought that art should be created for the enjoyment and pleasure of art rather than to teach or give something to the ordinary people, others completely disagreed. Although the subject of war would have been the common point shared unflinchingly by the members of two opposite sides, it was not picked up.

Clearly, there is a deficiency in Turkish literature during the early Republic of Turkey concerning the theme of war although Turks took part in several wars during this period. Identity and memory politics, state interference by monitoring and banning, literacy rate, ignorance of the intellectuals of the period were the main reasons of this deficiency. However, another important question comes to mind: Has there been any change concerning this drawback in the literature in recent years?

This question can be answered in two ways. Yes, there have been some changes, perhaps improvements, in Turkish literature in relation to the subject of war. There is an increase in number of the literary works written about the wars of the twentieth century. Concerning the themes of war, they include more sub-topics than those written during the early years of the republic. Among these works are Ayla Kutlu’s *Bir Gocmen Kustu O*, in which Kutlu tells the story of Adil Emir Bey who had to leave his country as a child because of the war and could not escape from being visitant, Mehmet Niyazi Ozdemir’s *Canakkale Mahseri*, an epic novel, in which the Gallipoli campaign, heroism in the battle, and expulsions are described as showing the both side, Turgut Ozakman’s *Su Cilgin Turkler*, in which Ozakman tells the period of the War of Independence, Mustafa Necati Sepetcioglu’s *Ve Canakkale: Geldiler-Gorduler-Donduler*, which is a triplet about the Gallipoli Campaign, Buket Uzuner’s *Uzun Beyaz Bulut Gelibolu*, in which Uzuner tells a story about a secret between a young woman from New Zealand who came to Gallipoli to search for his great-grandfather’s lost tomb and a grandmother wandering with her cane in the Canakkale National Park. Although there is an increasing tendency toward the theme of “war” in recent times, it is limited only to War of Gallipoli, World War I. Therefore, it can be said that there is still not enough literary works on this subject in Turkish literature. Contemporary writers feel more independent in writing about most of the subjects. However, this does not mean they are completely free in doing their job, because indirect manipulation of the state or other political factors still go on to affect them.

In conclusion, concerning the war literature in Turkish, there was a silence, or a “silenced” community, during the early years of the Turkish Republic. Looking at the historical circumstances, one can argue that this was an absolutely necessary attitude during this time. However, this cannot change the reality that is, with some exceptions, lack of an important part in Turkish literature. Turkish writers should put an end to this unfavorable ongoing situation and produce meritorious works on this subject to make progress.

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