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A New Perspective on the Turkish Novel: Robert P. Finn, “The Turkish Novel”

Esma Taskin, Research Scholar, School of Languages, Literature and Humanities
Nalanda University, Rajgir, Bihar, INDIA

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Author

Esma Taskin, Research Scholar

E-mail : esmataskin46@gmail.com

shodhsamagam1@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we shall first examine the historical development of the novel as a genre and, in particular, analyse the evolving elements of the Turkish novel during the period 1872–1900 widely regarded as its early phase in the light of Robert P. Finn’s book “The Turkish Novel”. Although the novel and the short story were initially thought to be the same, over time a distinction was made, and there is now a consensus that these genres should be treated as separate categories. Having made this distinction, we shall examine the sources that constitute the novel in Turkish literature and the developmental stages of the Turkish novel. We shall discuss both the themes explored in the Turkish novel and the innovations introduced by the novels of the Tanzimat period in terms of style and principles.

KEY WORDS

New Perspective, Turkish Novel, Literature.

The Turkish Novel

In Turkish literature, the novel and the short story have coexisted, often overlapping, throughout the entire period of Tanzimat literature. Whilst the short story is a genre rooted in tradition, the novel entered our literature as a genre of Western origin. However, for the Ottoman intellectual, who was not yet familiar with the short story genre, there was only the novel or simply the ‘long story’ and during this period, both genres were referred to collectively as ‘hikâye’ under a single heading. In Turkish literature, the novel and the short story have coexisted, often overlapping, throughout the entire period of Tanzimat literature. Whilst the short story is a genre rooted in tradition, the novel entered our literature as a genre of Western origin. However, for the Ottoman intellectual, who was not yet familiar with the short story genre, there was only the novel or simply the ‘long story’ and during this period, both genres were referred to collectively as ‘hikâye’ under a single heading.”¹

In his work “*The Turkish Novel*”, Robert P. Finn has categorised the Turkish novel under eight different headings; under each heading, he has examined, from a critical perspective, what the novel has brought to our literature as a new genre. The works produced in the novel genre between 1872 and 1900 *The First Phase of the Turkish Novel* contain new themes through this genre, which originated in the West. Although the Ottoman Empire’s period of autocratic rule partially hindered the development of the novel genre, the novelists of the Tanzimat era contributed to our literature. Although the Ottoman Empire’s period of despotism partially hindered the development of the novel genre, the novelists of the Tanzimat era became the bearers of a new culture through the novels they adapted into our literature. In his analysis of the Turkish novel, Robert Finn discusses some of the earliest novels in Turkish literature in the chapter entitled “*Early Period: 1872–1900*”. *Telemak (Telemaque)*, the first translated novel, and subsequently *Taâþþuk-ý Talât ve Fitnat*, the first indigenous novel written by ‘emsettin Sami, mark the beginning of the Turkish novel. It remains to be seen just how successful this book has been in the literary sphere, but this translation has shown that in the earliest translations from the West, ‘wisdom’ was prioritised over literary merit.

“This was followed by a summary of “*Les Misérables*” (Sefiller), serialised in “*Ceride-i Havâdis*” a few years later, and “*Robinson Crusoe*” (1860), which the chronicler Ahmet Lutfi Efendi translated from the Arabic version.”² In this way translations from the West began to attract increasing attention. These translations played a significant role in the transition from the traditional narrative tradition to the modern short story. First and foremost, topics that had hitherto been unfamiliar within the literary sphere of the little-known West were introduced, albeit to a limited extent, to the Ottoman readership. Consequently, the East–West dilemma emerged.

Despite the spread of Westernisation, the upper classes were neither entirely Western nor entirely Ottoman. Whatever the political and philosophical views of the intellectuals might have been, it was generally understood that they were caught between the two civilisations. The coexistence of East and West had not been confined to state institutions; it had also created a dichotomy amongst the people. As things progressed in this way, the gap between the great culture and the lesser culture began to widen.” The themes of the Turkish novel up to the 1950s were largely shaped by this movement towards Westernisation. If we look at the most renowned writers of this period, we see that almost all of them addressed the issue of Westernisation.”³

Robert Finn, when discussing the Turkish novel, states that it was not a developed genre for its time and that it was unable to view its own era with a critical eye. To understand this, it is necessary to examine the sources that nourished the novel.

If we look at the sources that informed the novel, we can see the earliest example of this in Aziz Ali Efendi’s work *Muhayyelât-ý Aziz Efendi*. This work was first published in 1852. It was written by Aziz Ali Efendi from Crete. Its subject matter, narrative style and the interconnection of events and subplots are reminiscent of the structure of classical Eastern tales, particularly *One Thousand and One Nights (Binbir Gece Masallari)*. What sets it apart, however, is the greater emphasis on themes centred on talismans and magic. Emin Nihat Bey’s work *Müsameretnâme* is also an important source in terms of the development of our literature. It contains seven stories. It was published between 1872 and 1875. With this work, Emin Nihat has provided us with some of the first noteworthy examples of the modern Turkish short story. This style not only reminds us of the *Tales of the Thousand and One Nights* but has also introduced us to the *Decameron* stories from Europe. Although the language in these works is at times refined and difficult to understand, we can say that it is generally straightforward. Whilst the themes are based on traditional folk tales, they also address human relationships and social problems in the post-Tanzimat era. For this reason, the *Müsameretnâme* presents the first significant example of the coexistence of the old and the new during the transitional period of our literature. Finn, who views Ottoman society and literary life through a Western lens, demonstrates that these novels are not only powerful narratives but also manifestos that reflect the culture of the era. Whilst viewing the novel as a genre foreign to Ottoman culture within the framework of Western discourse, he also highlights at times in a mocking tone the similarities between Western works and those produced during this period.

In the second chapter, which focuses on early novels, Robert Finn states that Turkish literature overcame its initial struggles in transitioning to the novel form with *Taassuk-i Talât ve Fitnat*. This work—which could be described as a short story or the first indigenous novel stands out from the stories mentioned above due to the complexity of its events and characters, bringing it a step closer to the novel than to the short story. Like other

novels written during the same period, this novel is built around a common theme: the pitfalls of marriage. "Some of the issues that stand out in the work and which were novel for the time can be listed as follows: slavery, a theme that would make its presence felt in places throughout Tanzimat literature, is subject to the author's criticism in this story, though it does not take centre stage." Aslen zenci olan Ayşe Kadın, memleketinden kaçırılıp yepyeni bir hasret duygusu içinde hatırlar."⁴ When comparing the characters, Finn highlights the behavioural patterns they exhibit within their respective cultures. The flashbacks, internal narratives and memories that appear from time to time in the novel are features derived from the Eastern storytelling tradition and, in particular, from the mesnevis. The language and style of this novel are flawed. In this respect, it is inferior to that of his contemporary, Ahmet Mithat Efendi. Apart from the descriptive passages, the simplicity of the dialogue also catches the reader's attention.

The fact that the plot of *Taassuk-ı Talât ve Fitnat* unfolds in a highly orderly and symmetrical manner reflects the tendency of Tanzimat novels to take the easy route, a structure frequently encountered in this genre. The Ottoman fabric depicted in the work makes its presence felt. Robert Finn argues that people caught between the Western novel genre and Ottoman tradition and Western culture are also archetypes. He emphasises that they are archetypes in terms of the ideas put forward during that period as well. The novel's tragic conclusion is also an allusion to the genre of tragedy.

The first writer of the 'novelist generation' was Ahmet Mithat Efendi. There is undoubtedly some truth in it being referred to as a 'writing machine'. It began to be published at roughly the same time as *Müsameretnâme*. 'Whilst the stories in *Müsameretnâme* share similar characteristics, it is evident that the stories in *Letâif-i Rivâyât* brought a wide variety of issues and themes to the forefront of literary discourse.' Emin Nihat's *Müsameretnâme* has also been examined in terms of the topics it covers. Whilst this can be explained by Ahmet Mithat Efendi's prolific writing, which covered a wide range of subjects, the fact that the series of stories was published over a very long period of time can also be cited as a reason for the richness of its subject matter. The first volume of the *Letâif-i Rivâyât* series, which comprises twenty-five volumes, was published in 1871, whilst the last was written in 1894.⁵

Ahmet Mithat Efendi, whose aim was to educate society in many ways, never claimed to be a novelist but sought to guide society in moral matters. In his book, Robert Finn addresses this topic whilst taking a critical look at Tanpýnar's perspective on Ahmet Mithat Efendi. Although Tanpýnar refrains from praising Ahmet Mithat's aim, Finn supports Ahmet Mithat Efendi. Whilst he supports him on the basis of his perspective on society, he also highlights Ahmet Mithat Efendi's admiration for the West.

Although Robert Finn criticises the artists of the period for being influenced by the West, he does not dwell at length on the question of which aspects of the West should be emulated. This demonstrates that Ottoman society and way of life should not be considered solely in terms of innovations. What were the factors that made opening up to the West a necessity? These need to be examined.

In this regard, the novel by Ahmet Mithat Efendi that warrants examination is *Felâtn Bey and Rakým Efendi*. This is the most significant novel to have addressed the 'alafranga' characterisation and the misguided Westernisation of the Tanzimat novel. In the novel, *Felâtn Bey and Rakým Efendi* are compared in many respects.

Ahmet Mithat Efendi, whilst criticising Felatun, states that he ought to be like Rakým. Whilst praising Rakým, he argues that Felatun is living his life in the wrong way. If we read the novel from Felatun's perspective, we can actually see how one ought not to behave. Felatun Bey, who has taken on the traits of the West to an extreme degree, is such a brazen character that he has the books he has acquired bound purely for show and places them on the shelves of his library. He criticises the superficiality of Westernisation. Rakim Efendi, on the other hand, is portrayed as his exact opposite. West. In short, the emphasis is on adopting the positive aspects of the West whilst avoiding its negative ones.

He draws a comparison between Mr Felatun and Mr Rakým. He portrays Felatun as a fool. His observations on clothing are evident in places. Rakým adheres to tradition in his dress. He combines Western fashion with Felatun's style. Rakým Efendi is portrayed as a prudent and consistent individual. The text dwells extensively on the word 'work' and conveys the importance of earning a living through hard work via the character of

Rakým. Rakým spends his money wisely and demonstrates modernity by standing on his own two feet. Rakým has no siblings, but he does have a concubine. The reason for this is education. A concubine is taken as a slave and is then educated and brought up. The novel also illustrates Istanbul's significance through the Ziklas family. The fact that it is a city bridging East and West is one of the factors influencing this family's decision.

Felatun Bey, on the other hand, emerges as the central figure in the narrative of misguided Westernisation. He is the exact opposite of Rakým in character. He considers himself highly knowledgeable. He engages in casual relationships with foreign women. It would not be an exaggeration to say that all negative traits are concentrated in this character. Through this character, the author teaches the reader what should not be done. The character of Felatun bears a resemblance to Bihruz Bey and Pöhret.

The Tanzimat writers held the view that the novel should reflect reality. This is because, as we have said, their aim was to serve the public good. Namık Kemal, in particular, applies to the novel the same principles he had envisaged for the theatre. In his view, the novel is a means of serving the public good; it is a form of wholesome entertainment. Ahmet Mithat was one of the most renowned figures to have produced works in this genre. Novelists and short-story writers tackle realistic subjects. However, it is evident that romanticism predominates in their style. It is only in the work of Nabizâde Nâzım that we can see the correct definition and application of realism and naturalism. In the preface to his short story *Karabibik*, he explains what realism and naturalism are.

Robert Finn also focuses on the general characteristics of the Turkish novel. Writers have not concealed their own personalities in their works; indeed, at times they have even interrupted the flow of the narrative to impart information and advice to the reader. Under the influence of realism, second-generation artists placed great importance on observation and wrote their works in a more realistic style.

"In his essay entitled '*Cars and Sin*', Finn examines Recaizade Ekrem's novel *Araba Sevdasi* and discusses the innovations that have found their way into the Turkish novel through the character of Bihruz. He delineates the boundaries of the 'Westernised' character type by drawing parallels between Don Quixote and Bihruz Bey. He compares Bihruz who is caught in a tug-of-war with his mother to the 'Westernised' characters of his era, noting that he is portrayed as both naive and shrewd."⁶ Therefore, when analysing *Araba Sevdasi*, we need to focus on the character of Bihruz and the technique Recaizade employed to bring this character to life.⁷ In *Araba Sevdasi*, just as in *Madame Bovary*, there is a tension between fantasy and reality; indeed, this is first revealed to the reader through the character of Bihruz in this novel. A dual paradigm emerges. Bihruz Bey reads novels and poems by French authors and attempts to transform the lives depicted therein into reality. There is a Bihruz Bey who lives in a world of fantasy, much like Don Quixote. We can see this as a sequel to Felatun. Bihruz Pasha's son has a keen interest in cars, fashion and the French language.

The most notable feature of this book is its intriguing narrative technique. There is a great deal of internal monologue, which plays a significant role. As we can see, Bihruz has three interests: fashion, cars and speaking French. These are all material and external interests. His habit of reading books, letting his imagination run wild and trying to live out these fantasies in real life is another example of this. Bihruz speaks French, trying to be different, but ends up looking ridiculous. "The real world of self-interest, which the innocent Bihruz living in his own fantasy world fails to grasp, is not a beautiful world." The characters in the novel who represent real life are more selfish, more calculating and more concerned with their own interests than Bihruz, whom they find a little eccentric and whose naivety they take advantage of."⁸

Writers of this period took their cue from French literary figures such as Balzac, Flaubert, Zola and the Goncourt brothers; they were greatly influenced by the movements of realism and naturalism. The most famous novels of this literary period are *Mai ve Siyah* and *Apk-ý Memnu*. Robert Finn discusses Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil's "*Ýlk Ustababıdy*" and his early novels. The works *Sefile*, *Nemide*, *Bir Ölünnün Defteri* and *Ferdi ve Pürekâsı* are the early, somewhat unpolished works Ziya produced during his formative years. The characters in these works have been compared, and their differences and shortcomings have been highlighted. However, in terms of structure, *Ferdi ve Pürekâsı* is regarded as the most successful.

Under the heading 'Robert Finn, Halit Ziya: Works of the Mature Period', Finn discusses the novels *Mai ve Siyah* and *Abk-y Memnu*. These novels represent a departure from the Tanzimat period.

Halit Ziya's work *Mai ve Siyah* also marks the beginning of the Turkish novel in the Western sense. The work depicts artists who fade into obscurity at their place of work namely transferred knowledge.

Another significant factor in the development of the novel was works translated from the West. In these works, authors gradually began to shift their focus to other subjects; the social themes addressed during the early period of the Tanzimat gave way, during the *Servet-i Fünun* period, to a greater emphasis on individual themes. Along with the new themes drawn from the West, the writers' narrow horizons also broadened, and, inspired by these novels, they themselves produced works of great aesthetic merit. The finest example of this can be seen in Halit Ziya's novel *Abk-y Memnu*. This work was written under the influence of Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. For example, we might say that *Felsefe-i Zenan* is the first work in our literature to be written in epistolary form. Similarly, *Araba Sevdasi* is recognised as the first realist novel.

CONCLUSION

Robert Finn has examined the historical development of the Turkish novel from a critical perspective. Comprising chapters organised around the novels and themes of the period, the book addresses both the political climate of the time and the social issues that had arisen within society. The work, entitled *The Turkish Novel: The Early Period, 1872–1900*, is a study that sheds light on the Turkish novel through the diverse themes explored in works produced during the Tanzimat and *Servet-i Fünun* periods.

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