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# Literature (Ottoman Empire)

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The linguistic heterogeneity and literary plurality of the Ottoman Empire has typically been explored under various national literary traditions. This meant that *milli edebiyat* (national literature) of Ottoman-Turkish writers during the First World War, for instance, would be categorized as distinct from their Armenian, Greek, Arab or Kurdish contemporaries. In this article, I explore different conceptualizations of early Turkish nationalism in the *milli edebiyat* canon, while evaluating Armenian literature in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. The map of various literary traditions outlined in this article needs to be complemented with analyses of Greek, Jewish, Kurdish, and Arabic literatures and other linguistic repertoires of the Ottoman Empire.

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## Introduction

The literary plurality of the [Ottoman Empire](#) during the First World War has generally been studied

under various national literary traditions. *Milli edebiyat* (national literature) of Ottoman-Turkish writers, for example, has been analyzed in isolation from their Armenian, Greek, Arab or Kurdish contemporaries.<sup>[1]</sup> The other “national” traditions of the Empire, for instance, Armenian literary works, have been studied in their connection to an emerging Armenian [nationalism](#), to the feminist awakenings of Armenian women writers, and to the [genocide](#) of 1915-1916.<sup>[2]</sup> A few scholarly works have appeared that call for the interaction of such national literary traditions of the Ottoman Empire and indeed more research is needed.<sup>[3]</sup> In this article, I analyze different conceptualizations of early Turkish nationalism in the *milli edebiyat* canon, while evaluating the literary debut of Ottoman and Armenian women writers and the different manifestations of Armenian literature in the Ottoman Empire during the First World War.

## ***Milli Edebiyat* (National Literature)**

*Milli edebiyat* (national literature), emerging with the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, has typically been used as the generic term to describe the proliferation of literary works and the variety of literary genres revolving around early phases of Turkish nationalism. The writers included in the canon of *milli edebiyat* produced works simplifying the language and discussed themes regarding linguistic and cultural unity and Turanism. The movement crystallized around the magazine *Genç Kalemler* (*Young Pens*), published originally in Thessaloniki in 1911. Moreover, this national literature of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had a serious impact on early Republican literature (1923 onwards).

Even though the eve of the First World War was an enthusiastic moment for Ottoman literature in general, freedom of expression was still a utopian ideal. In the post-1908 period, extensive [censorship](#) had already begun and would last until 1923.<sup>[4]</sup> Censorship generally entailed banning publications articulating the slightest opposition to the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP) regime, particularly during the time of the CUP’s absolute power between 1913 and 1918.<sup>[5]</sup> For a few years during the war, censorship also extended to discussions about the Ottoman Empire’s entry into the First World War, i.e. anti-war views were strictly forbidden.<sup>[6]</sup>

The development of nationalism, the articulation of a variety of ideologies, can be followed through the leading literary journals of the time and the national clubs that were founded to foster national development in literature, the arts, music, and theater. For instance, the literary journal *Genç Kalemler*,<sup>[7]</sup> included discussions on simplifying the language and eliminating Arabic and Persian borrowings.<sup>[8]</sup> The effort to make the written language similar to spoken language (vernacular) would enable more readers to understand publications. Spearheaded by prominent intellectuals, such as Ömer Seyfettin (1884-1920), Ali Canip Yöntem (1887-1967), and Ziya Gökalp (1876-1924), this exchange was called the *Yeni Lisan* (New Language) debate.<sup>[9]</sup> The leading association that housed discussions around nationalism was *Türk Ocağı* (Turkish Hearth).<sup>[10]</sup> Organizations like *Türk Bilgi Derneği* (Turkish Science Association) and *Türk Gücü* (Turkish Empowerment) were also founded

after 1913 and were located in the headquarters of *Türk Ocağı*.<sup>[11]</sup> *Türk Bilgi Derneği* was a scientific academy that would operate according to nationalist guidelines, covering fields such as Turkish Studies, Islamic Studies, Biology, Philology, Sociology, Math, Physics, and Turkism with a positivist approach.<sup>[12]</sup>

## ***Turan mefkuresi* (Turan Ideal)**

*Turan mefkuresi* (Turan Ideal) is an important concept for understanding the poets and writers of the period.<sup>[13]</sup> In general, prior to and during the First World War, pan-Turanism entailed a mythic glorification of Turkish nationalism, a strengthening of mono-ethnic nationalism within the Ottoman Empire, and a political and cultural union with other Turkic peoples in Central Asia. Various prominent intellectuals varied in their different conceptualizations of Turan and Turanism. One of the best examples of the lively patriotic agitation seen in the period leading up to the First World War, propagandizing pan-Turanism, was Ziya Gökalp's first poetry book entitled *Kızılelma* (Red Apple).<sup>[14]</sup> Gökalp's poems, under much debate whether or not he pursued expansionist policies, conceived of nationalism as the formation of a linguistically and culturally unified nation. A few of Gökalp's poems were about the separation between religion and state and early discussions of secularization.<sup>[15]</sup> Gökalp's poems also focused on improving education, professional opportunities for women, and increasing the productivity of women.<sup>[16]</sup>

Until the Armistice of Mudros (30 October 1918), the Turanism of Gökalp and other Unionist nationalists close to him had the upper-hand on nationalist authors. After the armistice, Pan-Turanism would quickly be substituted by a more restricted Turkish nationalism.<sup>[17]</sup> Even Gökalp himself gave up on his dream of Turan, concentrating rather on the development of national culture.<sup>[18]</sup> Mehmet Emin Yurdakul (1869-1944), Yahya Kemal Beyatlı (1884-1958), and Mehmet Akif Ersoy (1873-1936) in poetry, Ömer Seyfettin, Refik Halit Karay (1888-1965), and Halide Edib Adivar (1884-1964) in prose were considered to be part of the same national movement.<sup>[19]</sup> Even though these writers had different opinions concerning the CUP government, Turkish nationalism and the First World War, they all shared a common approach concerning the survival of the state and nation.<sup>[20]</sup> Halide Edib Adivar and Yahya Kemal Beyatlı's approaches to nationalism were more moderate. These writers were distraught by the Sarıkamış failure at the beginning of the war and the massacres of the Armenians. After Gallipoli, the anxiety about an Entente attack made them more critical of the CUP and its pan-Turanist policies.<sup>[21]</sup>

## **Fiction**

While the pioneering work of many authors stands out in this period, the following paragraphs describe the contributions of Ömer Seyfettin and Refik Halit Karay. Ömer Seyfettin was a "pioneer of modern Turkish short story writing."<sup>[22]</sup> Writing for the Salonica journal *Genç Kalemler*, he used

simplified language and became one of the founders of the *Yeni Lisan* movement. During 1914-1917, Seyfettin wrote poems and published in *Türk Yurdu* (*Turkish Homeland*), *Halka Doğru* (*Toward the People*), *Türk Sözü* (*Turkish Language*), *Donanma* (*The Navy*), and *Tanin* (*Resonance*). He propagated ideas of Turan and a Turkish union. At the end of 1913, he became editor-in-chief of *Türk Sözü*, a cultural magazine close to the CUP. Prior to the Ottoman entry into the First World War, Seyfettin prepared pro-CUP pamphlets.<sup>[23]</sup> He also published on the indoctrination of children.<sup>[24]</sup> However, toward the end of the war, he became critical of CUP policies.<sup>[25]</sup> During the armistice, Seyfettin criticized economic disparities and war profiteering.<sup>[26]</sup>

As an anti-nationalist in the national movement and an opponent of the CUP, Refik Halit Karay criticized war profiteers until the armistice. Halit started criticizing CUP leaders by name after they fled the country in 1918.<sup>[27]</sup> His first novel *Istanbul'un Bir Yüzü* (1918)<sup>[28]</sup> and the three articles he wrote immediately after the war, collected in *Sakin Aldanma, İnanma, Kanma!* (*Don't be Fooled, Do not Believe or be deceived!*, 1919)<sup>[29]</sup> were examples of such vehement criticism. In 1922, he fled to Syria and was included in the *Yüzellilikler* (*One Hundred and Fifty Undesirables*) list of individuals forbidden to return to Turkey.<sup>[30]</sup> Whenever the war was criticized in the post-1918 period, the style and contents of Halit's articles were used as examples.<sup>[31]</sup>

Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar's (1864-1944) novels, including *Şıpsevdi* (*The Lover*, 1911), *Hakka Sığındık* (*Under the Aegis of Justice*, 1919), *Can Pazarı* (*Human-Market*, 1924), thematize economic inequality and the exploitation of human labor.<sup>[32]</sup> The novels abound with discussions of communism, which in Gürpınar's literary and philosophical landscape is an impossible ideal. Set during World War I, *Hakka Sığındık*, for example, offers a scathing critique of the upper class feasting on wealth exploited under the reign of Abdülhamid, Sultan of the Turks (1842-1918). The novel's main character Nüzhet Ulvi, much like Robin Hood, steals from the rich to feed the poor. In lieu of political possibilities, most of Gürpınar's novels promote such heroic characters as a way of insuring poetic/economic justice.

The war was also a turning point for Turkish fiction not so much in aesthetic terms—most novels could still be categorized under realism—but in the heightening of nationalism and the changing of attitudes toward European civilization. In the aftermath of World War I, the **occupation** of Istanbul and the National Struggle of Turkey (1919-1922), novels such as Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's (1889-1974) *Sodom ve Gomorre* (1928) depicted not only a war-torn but also a civilization-torn society, with corrupt Turkish characters who sided with the occupying British and French diplomats or military officers. Hence, Istanbul under occupation was likened to Sodom and Gomorra because the Turks tried to make alliances with Europeans to reap material or personal benefits.

## From Feminist Awakenings to National Romances: Ottoman Women Writers

Works by women writers proliferated beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century with Fatma Aliye Topuz (1862-1936), Emine Semiye Önasya (1864-1944), and Halide Edib Adivar. Prominent topics included women in Islamic culture, effects of polygamy on women and children, the role of educated women, and women literati in society. Concomitant with the Balkan Wars (1912-13), the themes of the novels shifted to Ottoman politics, Turanism, and nationalism. Two prominent novels explored domestic politics and the symbolic logic of Turan during the First World War. The first novel, titled *Yeni Turan* by Halide Edib, was published in 1912.<sup>[33]</sup> Describing a CUP utopia, the novel emphasized the significance of a peaceful, democratic Ottoman parliament with political suffrage for women.<sup>[34]</sup> The second novel by Müfide Ferit Tek, entitled *Aydemir* (1918), presented Turan as a *mission civilisatrice* in Central Asia.<sup>[35]</sup> The Turkic peoples under Russian rule had to be rescued and educated by the Ottoman literati.

Starting from the end of the Balkan Wars (1912-13), Halide Edib was a Turanist without the “pan.” Her fantasy was a “modern homeland.”<sup>[36]</sup> Around 1918, she had given up on Turan fantasies altogether. In the article “Evimize Bakalım: Türkçülüğün Faaliyet Sahası,” (“Let’s Turn toward our Home: Turkism’s Field of Action”),<sup>[37]</sup> she wrote that she was against sending teachers to Azerbaijan when their help was desperately needed in Anatolia.<sup>[38]</sup> Written in the immediate aftermath of World War I, Halide Edib’s *Ateşten Gömlek (The Shirt of Flame, 1922)* is a singular text of early Turkish nationalism, affirming how the Greco-Turkish War (1919-1922) served to silence or repress complicity in the Armenian Genocide. Zabel Yessayan’s *Meliha Nuri Hanım* (written in 1927 in Armenian and translated into Turkish in 2015) is a response to Halide Edib’s novel.<sup>[39]</sup> With a Muslim woman protagonist who refuses to hear the calamities befalling Ottoman Armenians during World War I, the novel presents a first glimpse into the history of denial by illustrating the reluctance neither to witness the massacres, nor to empathize with the victims. In Yessayan’s novel, women (and men) like Meliha Nuri Hanım eroticize the military prowess of the Triumverate leaders while simultaneously fantasizing about military and imperialistic expansion in the world war, thereby blinding themselves to massacres, war crimes, etc. Whereas *Ateşten Gömlek* propagates Turkish militarism and nationalism, *Meliha Nuri Hanım* is a statement of nonviolence.

## Armenian Literature: 1908, 1915 and Beyond

The post-1908 period was equally productive for Ottoman-Turkish and Armenian writers.<sup>[40]</sup> Many Armenian writers who had gone into exile in the immediate aftermath of the Hamidian massacres (1895-6) returned to the Ottoman Empire in this period. Around 1915, there were a few avant-gardist movements within Armenian literature and the arts. Gosdan Zaryan (1885-1969) and Hrant Nazaryants (1886-1962) were leading names in such avant-gardist experimentation.<sup>[41]</sup> Published in 1914, *Mehyan (Tapinak/Temple)*, the leading journal for modernist experimentation, included works by Hagop Oshagan (1883-1948), Taniel Varujan (1884-1915), and Keğam Parseğyan (1883-1915).<sup>[42]</sup>

The feminist awakening amongst Armenian women writers, starting with Sırpuhi Düsap (1880-1915) and including the works of Zabel Yesayan (1878-1943) and Hayganuş Mark (1885-1966),<sup>[43]</sup> introduced topics such as the role of Armenian women at home and in the public sphere, criticism of enforced marriages, women's freedom to choose their partner, and discussions about class.<sup>[44]</sup> As one of the most important names in Armenian prose writing,<sup>[45]</sup> Zabel Yesayan, in a variety of works ranging from *Isbasman Srahin Meç (In the Waiting Room, 1903)* to *Verçin Pagajı (The Last Cup, 1917)*, and *Hokis Aksoryal (My Soul in Exile, 1922)*, employs inner monologue and emphasizes self-expression, literature and aesthetics as a means of self-fulfillment.<sup>[46]</sup> Yesayan is also the author of *Averagnerun Meç (Among the Ruins, 1911)*, a poignant delineation of the destruction of lives and property in the Cilicia region after the 1909 Adana Massacres.

One of the most influential authors of this period, Hagop Oshagan, wrote a comprehensive literary history of Western Armenia, *Hamabadger Arevmdahay Kraganutyan (Panorama of Western Armenian Literature)*<sup>[47]</sup> including fifty portraits of Armenian writers from what he considered to be the birth of Armenian literature around 1840 to the genocide which claimed the lives of most of the significant intellectuals in 1915.

Together with Gosdan Zarian and Keğam Parseğyan, Oshagan was one of the co-editors of the literary journal *Mehian (Pagan Temple)*. The Mehian writers were avant-gardists much like their European contemporaries, i.e. the French surrealists, the Italian futurists, and the German **expressionists**. In his early novels, including *Süleyman Efendi (1985)*, *Hacı Abdullah (1997)*, *Hacı Murat (1997)*, and *Dzag Bdugi (The Woman without Self-Restraint)*, Oshagan attempted to understand the psychology of the perpetrators (the Turks) prior to 1915. *Mnatsortats (The Remnants)* was the ultimate novel where Oshagan aimed to delve into the psychology of Turks and the harmful effects of this psychology on that of the Armenians between 1850-1915. He completed two volumes but could not finish the third which was to narrate the atrocities of 1915 from Anatolia to the Syrian desert. The first volume of the novel was translated into English in 2013.<sup>[48]</sup>

Prior to 1915, the second volume of Yervart Odyan's (1869-1926) Pançuni (Brainless) series, such as *Comrade Clueless* which illustrated the absurdities arising from the discrepancies between the theories and practices of socialism, was published. Further, Siamanto (1878-1915), who was better known with this *nom de plume* rather than his birth name (Atom Yarjanian), in various works such as *Hokevardi Yev Huysi Çakar (Torches of Agony and Hope, 1907)*, *Garmir Lurer Pargemes (Bloody News from My Friend, 1909)* about the Adana Massacres, and *Hayortiner (Armenians, 1905-8)* wrote about the atrocities that Armenians had witnessed.<sup>[49]</sup>

Because many intellectuals and writers, such as Taniel Varujan, Siamanto, and Krikor Zohrab (1861-1915) were executed in 1915, the Armenian Genocide had catastrophic consequences for Armenian literature. The writers who escaped persecution by the CUP started writing testimonies of the genocide as well as novels and works in other genres in different parts of the world. Such early diasporic writers include Zabel Yesayan, Vahan Totovents (1893-1938), Hagop Oshagan, Shahan



Shahnur (1903-1974), and Nigoghos Sarafian (1905-1973).<sup>[50]</sup>

The literary production that had come to a standstill after 1915, began once again in 1918 with the Armistice Period (1918-1923) following the Mudros Peace Treaty (1918). The intellectuals who were exiled to Anatolia or were hiding in Istanbul came back to the city to contribute to a lively intellectual scene. This period of renaissance was called “*Veradznunt*” (National Revival/Rebirth) and manifested itself first in the publishing industry. *Shant* (*Yıldırım/Bolt*), which was first published in 1911 with a three-year interruption after 1915 was the first journal to be published after 1918. During the Armistice Period, *Shant* published the first testimonies of the genocide, discussions about different genres, canons, and writers in Armenian literature. Therein, new and young authors found the space to develop their artistic and writing skills.<sup>[51]</sup>

## Conclusion

Producing scholarship on the literatures of empires is a highly challenging endeavor. As a final note, the map of Ottoman and Armenian literatures outlined in this article needs to be complemented with analyses of Greek, Jewish, Kurdish, [Arabic literatures](#) and other linguistic repertoires of the Ottoman Empire, as well as multifarious perspectives on the experiences of the First World War.

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## Notes

1. ↑ See for instance: Köroğlu, Erol: *Ottoman Propaganda and Turkish Identity: Literature in Turkey during World War I*, London 2007 or Moran, Berna: *Türk Romanına Eleştirel Bir Bakış [A Critical Analysis of the Turkish Novel]*, İletişim 2004.
2. ↑ Please see *Notos*'s special dossier on Armenian literature (*Notos Edebiyat Dergisi*, Ermenice Edebiyat/Notos Literary Journal, Special Dossier on Armenian Literature, 2015-2016).
3. ↑ See for instance Adak, Hülya and Altınay, Ayşe Gül: Guest editors' introduction: at the crossroads of gender and ethnicity, moving beyond the national imaginaire, in: *New Perspectives on Turkey*, No. 42, pp. 9-30.
4. ↑ Köroğlu, *Ottoman Propaganda* 2007, p. 36.
5. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 13.
6. ↑ *Ibid.*
7. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 40.
8. ↑ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

9. ↑ Note to the reader: The authors in this article who took on a surname after the 1934 Surname Law went into effect are referred to as such; Ibid.
10. ↑ Üstel, Füsün: İmparatorluktan Ulus-Devlete Türk Milliyetçiliği: Türk Ocakları (1912-1931) [Turkish Nationalism from Empire to Nation-State: Turkish Hearths], Istanbul 1997, p. 51.
11. ↑ Ibid., p. 64.
12. ↑ Ibid., p. 65.
13. ↑ Ibid., p. 192; See also Ersanlı, Büşra: İktidar ve Tarih: Türkiye’de “Resmi Tarih” Tezinin Oluşumu (1929-1937) [Power and History: The Construction of the “Official History” Thesis in Turkey], Istanbul 2003, pp. 87-89.
14. ↑ *Kızılelma* was published in 1914. Ibid., p. 122; See also Gökalp, Ziya: *Kızılelma* [Red Apple], Yalçın Toker (ed.), Istanbul 2014.
15. ↑ Ibid., p. 124.
16. ↑ Such poems include “Kadın” [“Woman”], “Ev Kadını” [“Housewife”], “Meslek Kadını” [“Professional Woman”], “Aile” [“Family”]. Ibid., p. 125.
17. ↑ Ibid., p. 195.
18. ↑ Ibid., p. 99.
19. ↑ Ibid., p. 196.
20. ↑ Ibid.
21. ↑ See for instance, Edib, Halide: “Ocağım, Türk Ocağına” [“My Family to the Turkish Family”, 1914]. Ibid., p. 151.
22. ↑ Ibid., p. 153.
23. ↑ See for instance, “Milli Tecrübelerden Çıkarılmış Ameli Siyaset” [“Political Acts deduced from National Experiences”]. The dates of these pamphlets are unknown. The contents of the works allow scholars to speculate on the dates of the pamphlets. Ibid., p. 156.
24. ↑ See for instance, “Mektep Çocuklarına Türklük Mefkûresi” [“Turkish Ideal for School Children”]. Ibid., p. 157.
25. ↑ Ibid., p. 196.
26. ↑ Ibid., p. 168.
27. ↑ Ibid., p. 181.
28. ↑ Karay, Refik Halid: *İstanbul’un Bir Yüzü* [A Facet of Istanbul], Istanbul 2017.
29. ↑ Karay, Refik Halid: *Sakın Aldanma, İnanma, Kanma*, Istanbul 2009.
30. ↑ Ibid., p. 183.
31. ↑ Ibid., p. 184.
32. ↑ See also Moran, *Türk Romanına Eleştirel Bir Bakış* I 2004.
33. ↑ Adivar, Halide Edib: *Yeni Turan* [New Turan], Istanbul 2000.
34. ↑ See Adak, Hülya: *Halide Edib ve Siyasal Şiddet: Ermeni Kırımı, Diktatörlük ve Şiddetsizlik* [Halide Edib and Political Violence: The Armenian Genocide, Dictatorships and Nonviolence], Istanbul 2016, pp. 38-39.
35. ↑ Tek, Müfide Ferit: *Aydemir*, Istanbul 2002.
36. ↑ Ibid., p. 151.
37. ↑ The article was published in *Vakit* (Time), 30 June 1918.



38. ↑ Ibid.
39. ↑ See also Uslu, Mehmet Fatih: Çanakkale’de Bir Ermeni Hekim ve Meliha Nuri Hanım [An Armenian Doctor in Çanakkale and Meliha Nuri Hanım]. In: Yesayan, Zabel: Meliha Nuri Hanım [Preface by Mehmet Fatih Uslu], Istanbul 2015, pp. 63-75.
40. ↑ Bakalım, Evimize: Türkçülüğün Faaliyet Sahası [Let’s Observe, Our Home: The Stie of Activities of Turkism], in: Vakit, 30 June 1918.
41. ↑ Uslu, Mehmet Fatih: Osmanlı’da Modern Ermenice Edebiyatın Ana Hatları [Main Outlines of Modern Armenian Literature in the Ottoman Empire] in: *Notos Edebiyat Dergisi* [Notos Literary Journal], 2015-2016, p. 25.
42. ↑ Uslu, Osmanlı’da 2015-2016, p. 26.
43. ↑ Ibid.
44. ↑ Aktokmakyan, Maral: “Ermeni Kadın Edebiyatına Kısa Bir Girizgah [Introduction to Armenian Women’s Literature], in: Notos Ermenice Edebiyat [Special Dossier on Armenian Literature], 2015-2016, pp. 35-7.
45. ↑ Bardakjian, Kevork: Modern Ermeni Edebiyatı [Modern Armenian Literature], Istanbul 2013, p. 201.
46. ↑ Ibid., p. 202.
47. ↑ Oshagan’s ten-volume *Panorama of Western Armenian Literature* was written between 1934-1938 and published between 1945-1983.
48. ↑ See Oshagan, Hagop. *The Remnants: The Way of the Womb*, G.M. Goshgarian (trans.), London 2013.
49. ↑ Bardakjian, Modern Ermeni Edebiyatı 2013, p. 182.
50. ↑ Uslu, Osmanlı’da 2015-2016, p. 26.
51. ↑ Şekeryan, Ararat: “Siamanto’dan Vahan’a Bir Yeniden Doğuş Hikayesi.” [From Siamanto to Vahan: A Story of Renaissance], in: *Notos Edebiyat Dergisi* [Notos Literary Journal], 2015-2016, p. 43. See also Nichanian, Marc: *Writers of Disaster: Armenian Literature in the Twentieth Century*, Glendale 2002 and *Edebiyat ve Felaket*, Istanbul 2011.

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