

SAYI 36 • 2010

OSMANLI ARAŐTIRMALARI

THE JOURNAL OF OTTOMAN STUDIES

*Beyond Dominant Paradigms in Ottoman
and Middle Eastern / North African Studies*

A Tribute to Rifa'at Abou-El-Haj

Misafir Editörler / Guest Editors

Donald Quataert and Baki Tezcan

İSAM 

‘Mad’ about Kemalism: An Early Republican Satire

*Christine Philliou**

Few paradigms have seemed as thoroughly dominant as the Kemalist paradigm in Turkey since the 1920s. Adherence to this paradigm has required the uncritical acceptance not only of the values and practices of laicism and progress in the national present, but the stark version of history that came to accompany and underpin Kemalism—namely that in the 1920s there was an abrupt and successful reorientation of Turkey from “east” to “west,” from the darkness of superstition and religion to the light of progress and science.¹ “East” was associated with, among other things, the Arabic and Persian languages, a range of Islamic practices and beliefs, and most manifestations of tradition as it had been perceived up to that point. Indeed virtually anything associated with the Ottoman past came to be understood as backward and in conflict with the new and modern Kemalist Turkey, and therefore lacking in value. In this light Atatürk’s legal and social reforms—such as the discouragement of the headscarf and the prohibition of the fez, and the alphabet reform which shifted the official language for Turkish from Arabic to a modified Latin script—were

* Columbia University.

1 See, for instance, the Preface and Chapter 9 of Michael Meeker, *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) for an incisive discussion of this process and a critique of how this history is presented in Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

and often are still portrayed simplistically as necessary measures applied to a willing populace.

While this Kemalist version of history has its own internal logic that jibes very well with European orientalism (in positing an oppositional and mutually exclusive relationship between “East” and “West” and essentially declaring that Turkey was switching sides), the student of history has to wonder what it all meant at the time for those living through the 1920s and 1930s, particularly those who had come of age during the devastating wars and mass dislocation that preceded the founding of the Turkish Republic. And that student of history will not find satisfactory answers in the official histories, in the few memoirs that have appeared in English, nor even in the many that have been published in Turkish by the generation that lived through this transition.²

And it is hardly by chance that until recently there has been a dearth of information, not just on direct opposition to specific Kemalist policies or the Kemalist paradigm in toto, but on any recollections that do not portray the Kemalist project as entirely positive.³ Michael Meeker, in *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity*, explored the subterranean imperial legacies in the Turkish Republic through a local study of the Black Sea coastal town of Of. From fieldwork done in the 1960s, Meeker looks back to the formative years of the Republic, the 1920s and 1930s, and further back to multiple periods of transition within the Ottoman pe-

2 For memoirs in English, see, for instance, Irfan Orga, *Portrait of a Turkish Family* (London: Eland, 1993). Memoirs in Turkish abound, although they are mostly written by enthusiastic participants in the Turkish War of Independence, such as those of Ali Cebesoy and Kazım Karabekir. Some, such as the memoirs of Çerkes Ethem, Halide Edip, and Rıza Nur, contain criticisms of aspects of Kemalism. For political histories, see, for instance, Erik Jan Zürcher, *Turkey: A Modern History* (London, New York: I.B.Tauris, 2004). Finally, for a more in-depth discussion of existing historiography regarding the early Turkish Republican era, see, “‘Mad’ about Kemalism: The inception of an Ottoman past in early Republican Turkey,” forthcoming *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, Spring 2011.

3 For a hint of the political climate in the early Republican era, see Tolga Köker, “The establishment of Kemalist secularism in Turkey,” in *Middle East Law and Governance* 1:2 (2009), wherein the author traces three mechanisms that “mediated the establishment of Turkish secularism.” Those three mechanisms were “exit, sincere voice, and self-subversion.”

riod, and finds that a combination of “amnesia and prohibition” surrounds the act of remembering the past generally, but specifically the Turkish War of Independence, foundation of the Turkish Republic, and the early years of Kemalism.⁴ Leyla Neyzi, in *İstanbul’da hatırlamak ve unutmak* has collected fascinating oral histories from members of the generation that experienced these same events, demonstrating that selective memory works to collapse the complexity of experience into a politically acceptable form.⁵ Amy Mills, in her recent *Streets of Memory* examines the mental gymnastics necessary in looking back with nostalgia on the “cosmopolitan” Ottoman past of a neighborhood in Istanbul while still remaining true to the modernist vision of Kemalist Turkey—mental gymnastics that leap over the moments of violence and transition that riddled the twentieth century.⁶

While anthropologists, sociologists, and geographers have provided many insights on the symptoms of this Kemalist predicament, then, historians have yet to offer an answer about what must have been the messy social realities of life—even for those who fit the normative ethno-linguistic profile of “Turks” in the Turkey of the 1920s and 1930s.⁷ Here I explore the beginnings of such an answer through analyzing a 12-scene satirical play, put forward as a “fantezi piyes” (fantasy play) in 1929. The author, Refik Halit Karay (1888-1965), might have agreed wholeheartedly with anthropologist Micheal Meeker’s evaluation of the amnesia surrounding the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Turkish Republic, for the title of the play is “Deli” (mad, crazy) and its plot has to do with a man, Maruf Bey (Mr. Known, as in common sense), who mysteriously lost his senses two days before the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, only coming

4 Michael Meeker, *A Nation of Empire: The Ottoman Legacy of Turkish Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), Chapter 9.

5 Leyla Neyzi, *İstanbul’da hatırlamak ve unutmak: birey, bellek, ve aidiyet* (Beşiktaş, İstanbul: Türkiye Ekonomik ve Toplumsal Tarih Vakfı, 1999) [To remember and forget in Istanbul].

6 Amy Mills, *Streets of Memory* (Athens: University of Georgia press, 2010).

7 I make this qualification because several scholars have examined and are in the process of examining the experiences of ethnic and religious minorities in Republican Turkey. Examples include Alexis Alexandris, *The Greek Minority of Istanbul and Greek-Turkish Relations, 1918-1974* (Athens: Center for Asia Minor Studies, 1992).

back to them in the Kemalist Turkey of 1930.⁸ Most telling, and despite the fact that the content of the play contains devastating critiques of the politics and culture of the 1920s, was that the author felt it necessary to place a kind of disclaimer at the start of the play, writing, “*Regarding this work: I am grateful to the kind deed of Atatürk, and say ‘This does not satirize our revolution, it makes it more clear.’*”⁹

And yet, Karay goes on to satirize myriad aspects of life and politics in early Republican Turkey, causing the reader to wonder who is “mad”—Maruf Bey, as living relic and representative of the conscience of the Ottoman past, or his physician, servant, son-in-law, grandchildren, and friends who reveal to him the new way of life as if it should be common sense, only six years after the transition to a Turkish Republic. After only a brief reading of the play, one is struck first by the taboo subjects that are broached, and at the same time by the thought that Maruf Bey’s reactions of shock and condemnation to the abrupt transformations that have gone on during his years of unconsciousness would naturally have provoked the same reactions in the minds of ordinary citizens who retained their senses throughout these years. And yet such ordinary citizens seem to have remained silent (as if stricken themselves with amnesia), and suppressed their memories of such reactions, if they had them, when asked in retrospect, leaving the historical record blank.

The play begins when Maruf Bey’s son-in-law Vacit Bey (related to *mevcut*, meaning present, or extant), learns from the “Doktor”(Doctor) that a “scientific miracle” has occurred and Maruf Bey has suddenly regained consciousness after 21 years. He had gone catatonic in July 1908, as his now late wife had reported at the time, with his eyes fixed on the “Ya

8 Refik Halit Karay, *Deli* (Istanbul: Kenan Basımevi ve Klişe Fabrikası, 1939). All quotations are from the play unless otherwise noted and are my own translation. Incidentally, decades later Republican parliamentarian and novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar wrote *Saatleri Ayarlama Enstitüsü*, which was recently translated by Ender Gürol, *The Time Regulation Institute: A novel* (Madison: Turko-Tatar Press, 2001). While this story gained far more notoriety than Karay’s “Deli,” I argue this was the case because the critique Tanpınar was expressing was not one of Kemalism per se, but rather one of bureaucratization as part of “modern life” in a universal and generic sense.

9 Meeker, *A Nation of Empire*, 286, discusses the arrests and persecution of “any who defied the secular reforms” in the early Turkish Republic.

Erhamü'r- Rahimin" sign on the wall, and had remained sitting "like an idol" (*put gibi*). Vacit Bey confirms that since that time, "if you give him food he eats, if we go out to the balcony he goes out, outside if the world comes to an end he's indifferent, doesn't ask...", to which the head servant (*kalfa*) Şebnur (whose name means in Persian "light of night," a name used for someone who knows even the most difficult things) says, "As if the world hadn't ended? What were the Freedoms (*Hürriyetler*), Unionist Action Armies (*Hareket Orduları*)..." and Vacit Bey agrees, "and the Balkan Wars (*Balkan Muharebesi*), World War (*Dünya Harbi*), occupation years (*işgal seneleri*), finally the National Victory (*Milli Zafer*)." The Doctor naively responds, "The poor man! He's got no knowledge of world events for the last 21 years" to which Şebnur, the realist, responds, "He's not the poor one, we're the poor ones... We saw all these things and what have we become..." (*O zavallı değil, zavallı olan biz... Onları gördük de ne olduk ki*).

Before even encountering Maruf Bey and the shock he is to experience, the reader is already thrown into a taboo framework—that of imagining the Turkish Republic in historical continuity with the wars and empire that preceded it. Most studies and discussions of Ottoman and Turkish history assume a deep divide at 1922, examining events and actors up to that date, or from that date onward, even as recent scholarly debates imply continuities of personnel and policies between the Committee for Union and Progress government and the Kemalist regime.¹⁰ Still, beginning with a periodization of 1908-1929 carries the implications of opening a veritable Pandora's box for the Kemalist paradigm.

As Maruf Bey comes to his senses, Vacit Bey reports that his first words were, "Thanks to our Sultan I am in good health!" (*Padişahımızın sayesinde afiyetteyim!*), and Vacit Bey goes on to explain that, naturally, he thinks he is still living in Sultan Hamid's time, to which Şebnur mumbles, "If only..." (*Keşke öyle olsaydı...*), a comment which Vacit Bey disregards and goes on, "The poor guy doesn't know that those days of tyranny have passed. The progress, civilization, knowledge that have reached the land today..." (*Zavallı bilmiyor ki o zulüm günleri geçti. Memleketin bugün vasıl olduğu terakki, medeniyet, irfan...*). It is Şebnur's mumbled statement that

¹⁰ See M. Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

is intriguing—in it is the simple but forbidden sentiment that must have been in the minds of so many living through the radical changes of the 1920s. Indeed Refik Halit Karay's play is starting to seem like a stage on which to express the collective unconscious in early Republican Turkey.

Before Maruf Bey is given a direct voice and the comical situation unfolds, the Doctor, Vacit Bey, and Şebnur have one more telling exchange, this one about how to give Maruf Bey the news that his wife and daughter had passed away during his years of unconsciousness. The Doctor naively directs the others to be careful in disclosing any news to Maruf Bey so as to avoid shocking him, and then asks how they have dealt with this sad news and the fact that he has grown grandchildren he had never met before. Şebnur reports, “we said ‘They’re gone, here are souvenirs for you.’” (*‘Onlar gitti, işte sana yadigarları...’ dedik.*) “His reaction?” Vacit Bey says, “His face puckered up as if he were going to cry, then he smiled, hugged and kissed the children, and asked their names.” Again, Karay conveys in microcosm what must have been the wrenching emotions of the traumas and transitions over these two decades—the indescribable sadness of losing one’s spouse and child—in essence losing the past and present, and the happiness of discovering grandchildren—of gaining a future, but one that is once removed from oneself.

From this point, a series of comic moments take place wherein Maruf Bey is abruptly exposed to the socio-cultural changes that have taken place in his absence. One scene has Maruf Bey in an exchange with his granddaughter, Ayten (a strikingly neo-Turkish name, which Maruf Bey comments on later in the play), who greets her grandfather, “Bonjur Büyükbaba!” and in response to his request for coffee warns him that caffeine is a stimulant and bad for the heart, especially for elderly people, so she cannot recommend it for him. He asks her if she learned these things while she was bedridden with typhoid fever, mistaking her short, boyish hairstyle for a remnant of the hair loss from disease. She then explains the fashion (*moda*) of short hair for women as part of the fact that people (humanity) today do not want any special differences between men and women, and this opens a larger conversation about gender differences and clothing/physical appearance. Maruf Bey is naturally shocked to hear that men no longer keep beards and mustaches, mistakes his old friend Yakup Hoca for “Christianized” (*Hristiyanlaştı*) because he wears a hat (which prompts a discussion of the “Hat Law” (*Şapka Kanunu*), and startles—to

say the least—over the triple whammy that granddaughter Ayten is not only in school (rather than staying at home where she presumably belongs) but studying chemistry, and doing so alongside male classmates. Just as bad for Maruf Bey is the fact that his grandson Özdemir is an athlete (*sporcu*), a concept which does not come easily to grandfather, who, when he begins to understand the meaning, shakes his head and says, “My God! Our family’s honor is destroyed...” (*Eyvah! Ailemizin şerefi mahvoldu desene...*). Things only get worse when Maruf Bey is told about the swimming talents of Ayten, who goes in the water with her male friends Kaya Turgut and Ali Şefik, and when her brother Özdemir says with pride that his friends told him his sister has the “finest body” (*Kız kardeşinin vücudu enfes... dediler*), and that the mufti of Istanbul kissed her forehead as soon as she got out of the water! Maruf Bey asks in joking disgust if the Şeyhülislam and the Patriarch were there to kiss her as well, the humor of which Ayten misses as she goes on to boast that Mr. Thomson, the director of the American School, pinned a medal on her chest after the swim.

This is all too much for Maruf Bey to take in, so he asks to take a rest, and turns to servant Şebnur: “what do you say, tomorrow we can go to the Merkez Efendi Tekke, we can get a little breather for me, slaughter a lamb (*kurban kessek*), but don’t let anyone else hear?” This forces Şebnur to inform him that not only the sufi lodges but the *türbes* were closed three years before, and when Maruf Bey shrinks in horror and asks why, she says, “do I know?” (*Bilir miyim ki...*). Maruf Bey asks jokingly if the *medreses* and *camis* are also closed, and is surprised to hear that indeed the *medreses* are closed, and that only the larger *camis* remain open.

From the shock of superficial changes in clothing and hairstyle, the critiques become more substantive as we proceed through the encounter between Ottoman gentleman Maruf Bey and the assortment of Turkish Republican strangers that are his family and friends. It begins when he points out the peculiarity of his granddaughter’s name, Ayten—“Vacit must have gone crazy... Or our son-in-law had no taste when picking out his children’s names—what kind of names are these? First of all, the roots of Ayten are wrong, one is Turkish and one is Persian and these two words don’t make a noun phrase (*tamlama*). As for Özdemir...” Şebnur cuts him off to say “Yakup Hoca used to say things like that, too...but then his thinking changed; he became a Turkist (*Türkçü*).” Maruf Bey asks, innocently at first, “What is a *Türkçü*? Does he bring Turks from Anatolia and sell

them? What rudeness is this? Just like a *yoğurtçu*, *kestaneci*, *helvacı* now there are trades like Lazist (*Lazcı*), Albanianist (*Arnavutçu*), and Kurdist (*Kürtçü*)?" Şebnur, closer to Maruf Bey's sensibilities than the others', says, "I can't really get it either, Great Sir! I think they call those who give themselves crude Turkish (*kaba Türkçe*) names Turkists (*Türkçü*), why else did Yakup Efendi make his name Tekin..."

But amidst the social comedy, Maruf Bey tramples on even more fundamental taboos of the Turkish Republic. He looks at the portrait on the wall and says, "There, hanging in a frame, is this handsome beardless Englishman's picture..." to which Ayten says, "Are you talking about Gazi [Atatürk]'s picture?" Maruf asks, "Which gazi?" and Ayten answers, "The Great Gazi...Gazi Pasha! The Greeks..." Maruf Bey cuts her off and says, "Ah, Gazi Ethem Pasha from the Greek War [Maruf Bey presumably means the earlier Greek-Ottoman War in 1897]? Impossible! Why would that great, renowned soldier get rid of his majestic beard?" Ayten, apparently not noticing the mistaken name by which Maruf Bey refers to him, says, "I don't know of a time when Gazi had a beard!" Maruf Bey's mistake is hardly without significance—readers would think first of Çerkes Ethem, a military leader, and sometimes brigand, of Circassian origins, under Atatürk who turned against him in the midst of the Turkish War of Independence and switched to the Greek side, and was thus seen as the ultimate "*vatan haini*," or traitor to the Turkish nation. To mistake the picture of Atatürk for a picture of Çerkes Ethem would be to mock the very inception of the Republic. And indeed, this is what is being implied: in scene five, Maruf Bey wonders out loud about all the things he has seen thus far, and as he turns back to the portrait on the wall, says, "Gazi Ethem Pasha hairless (*cascavlak*)! Am I misunderstanding something? Surely I haven't recovered yet, I'm still sick, maybe I am mad. Yes, I must be mad. Or else everyone else has gone mad, and I'm the only one left that still has my senses!"

The Republic itself is once again the target of satire in scene 10, which takes place on the seventh anniversary of the liberation of Izmir (*İzmir Kurtuluşu*), and Maruf Bey watches as his grandson Özdemir says, "it's the day we threw the Greeks into the sea," then leans out the window and shouts, "Long live the army! Long live the Turkish soldier!" Maruf Bey is still confused when fear takes over upon his seeing the airplanes flying in formation as part of the military parade, and more shock as he learns that

the Greek army had reached Eskişehir and the British had occupied and been expelled from Istanbul itself, not to mention that Ankara is the new capital. The grandchildren and Yakup Bey sit down with Maruf Bey, ready to celebrate the holiday with a bottle of champagne and listen to Atatürk's speech (*nutuk*). Karay refrains from openly lampooning the speech (although merely quoting the speech as he does, in this context, forces the reader to see it from a critical distance), but surrounds the moment with humor by having Maruf Bey mistake the radio for a gramophone, and the leader's speech with speeches of yesteryear.

The play ends with a party, where the guests dance the Foxtrot and the Charleston, and try to teach the words to Maruf Bey, first for the Foxtrot: Valansiya! Ninni ninni yavruma! Valansiya! Elma yanak, kiraz dudak, Ben öpeyim, sen de bak!" (Baby, baby! Valencia! Apple cheeks, cherry lips, let me kiss [you], just you see!) These are scandalous enough lyrics for Maruf Bey, who has reached his limits, but the others move on to the Charleston:

Bacaklar eğri, sakat (Legs crooked, crippled)
 Ben yanpuri iki kat (I [take] two steps to the side)
 Felekten yemiş tokat (Humanity, as if slapped in the face by destiny)
 Gibi beşeriyet
 Garip, gülünç vaziyet (Strange, funny circumstances)
 Ne çirkin medeniyet! (How ugly is civilization!)
 Çarliston oldu, çıktı, fakat... (Charleston is here, it's out, but...)
 Miyav! Miyav! Kara kedi (Meow! Meow! Black cat)
 Hav! Hav! Beyaz köpek (Woof! Woof! White dog)
 Miyav, Miyav, Miyav! (Meow! Meow! Meow!)
 Karşılaştılar! (They met!)
 Birleştiler! (They united [i.e. copulated]!)
 Hırıştılar! (They growled at each other!)
 Miyav! Miyav! (Meow! Meow!)
 Hav! Hav! (Woof! Woof!)

Watching these strangers dance and make animal sounds, Maruf Bey slowly joins in, as if in a trance. He starts moving and shouting more violently, until the others realize he is not dancing, but kicking and stamping and barking like a dog, actually turning himself into an animal. The Doctor has the last word as the others look on: "Before he was a quiet madman; this time he's wild and dangerous!" The message is clear, and not particularly funny, by the end: it seems that one kind of madness, that of the Ottoman past, has been replaced by another, that of Kemalist Turkey, and this new one is possibly more dangerous than the old.

Not surprisingly, Refik Halit Karay did not write this play while living in Turkey, nor was the play published in Turkey until 1939, one year after the death of Atatürk. Karay was in fact living in exile in Aleppo—part of the new French Mandate state of Syria and therefore beyond the purview of Turkish censors—when he wrote the play. It was published also in Aleppo, where there seems to have been an active Armenian- and Turkish-language publishing industry in the 1920s and 1930s.¹¹ Karay remained in Aleppo until 1938, when he was given pardon, apparently by Atatürk himself shortly before the latter's death.

Taking the content of the play together with the context of Karay's exile forces us to consider a number of points. Just as Maruf Bey acts as the conscience (or the collective unconscious) for his friends and family, who seem to have forgotten, suppressed, or just ignored the very recent past, Refik Halit Karay in similar fashion disturbs the conscious narrative of a clean break with the Ottoman past that is so necessary to carrying on with a Kemalist present and future. His characters (the older ones, at least) express nostalgia, reverence, and a sense of identification with the Ottoman past, a past which to them contains not only loyalty to the sultan but values of family and masculine honor, a rich literary tradition, as well as the sadness that comes with loss and dislocation. These are all feelings which seem more than just natural, even necessary, when we stop to consider the radical rupture in social realities that people who survived the multiple

11 See Nicola Migliorino, *(Re)Constructing Armenia in Lebanon and Syria: Ethno-cultural Diversity and the State in the Aftermath of a Refugee Crisis* [Studies in Forced Migration 21] (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008); and Keith David Watenpugh, *Being Modern in the Middle East: Revolution, Nationalism, Colonialism, and the Arab Middle Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006) for the context of Aleppo in the interwar period.

wars and dislocations of the time must have experienced. And yet, they are not feelings that are given voice in official renderings of the inception of the Turkish Republic, or in the renderings of late Ottoman history that are permissible within a Kemalist paradigm.

The younger characters, in contrast, seem devoid of humor or any form of critical distance on the new norms and values of their society. Even those who are old enough to remember the world before 1922 (with the exception of the servant, Şebnur) seem unwilling or unable to reflect on it. And the reader cannot help but wonder if Karay is suggesting that most Turks exhibited a similar behavior at the time, making modern-day anthropologist Michael Meeker's point about amnesia and prohibition even sharper.

What is the genius in Refik Halit Karay's "Deli?" In so many other historical moments and other societies, this would have been an innocent, even trite tale. Indeed, at first glance it seems that he is stating the obvious, but the very fact that even the obvious was not allowed in the bounds of modern Turkey (by dint of both exile and, we presume, censorship) is a fascinating statement on the depth of domination enjoyed by the Kemalist paradigm until recently. The revelation one experiences when reading "Deli," however, is that it was possible, even if just over the border in Syria, for a Turk (someone who, in ethnic and religious terms, belonged very much in the new Republic of Turkey) to break the silence surrounding the experience of transition from Ottoman to Turkish as it was happening. This only prompts a cascade of further questions about the thoughts and emotions of so many others who refrained from speaking and writing at the time and since.