

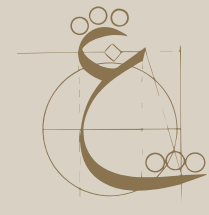
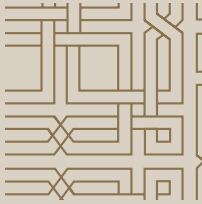


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08



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# From Concept to Novel: Tâhirülmevlevî's (1877-1951) Sufi Engagement and Critique of *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* (Individual Initiative) in the Late Ottoman Era



ARZU EYLÜL YALÇINKAYA\*

## ABSTRACT

During the late Ottoman era, particularly the Hamidian period (1876-1909), a culture of diligent labor and industriousness emerged, emphasizing economic progress. State-led initiatives triggered substantial socio-economic shifts, alongside increased regulations to integrate Sufi networks into state apparatus to reduce their economic burden due to constant benefit from the endowment funds. At this juncture, Tâhirülmevlevî (Mehmet Tâhir Olgun) (d. 1951) departed from the Yenikapı Mevlevîhâne and firmly rejected benefiting from endowment funds. Instead, he turned to press and publishing activities that he believed would sustain both his livelihood and spiritual service. His narrative, especially encapsulated in his autobiographical novel *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* (1912), offers a critique of the administrative reforms of the era, articulating a perspective that the lack of ethical integrity and judicial fairness severely impeded the successful adoption of teşebbüs-i şahsî (*individual initiative*) frameworks. His reflections extend to critique societal perceptions of Sufis as economic dependents, delving into why substantial reforms failed to gain traction within the Turkish-Muslim community. Through his literary and journalistic endeavors, Olgun not only personifies the concept of individual initiative but also critically examines its execution and impact within the complex socio-political landscape of late Ottoman society, underscoring the complex interplay between individual aspirations and collective societal transformations.

**Keywords:** Late Ottoman Era, Sufism, Personal Initiative, Tâhirülmevlevî, Printing Press.



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TEŞEBBÜS-İ ŞAHSÎ'YE SUFİ BİR  
MECRA: TÂHİRÜLMEVLEVÎ'NİN  
(1877-1951) GİRİŞİMCİ RUHU VE  
GEÇ OSMANLI DÖNEMİ ÜZERİNE  
ELEŞTİREL BAKIŞLARI

## ÖZ

Geç Osmanlı dönemi özellikle II. Abdülhamid devri (1876-1909), tasavvufî oluşumların devletin reform girişimlerine katkıları açısından ve vakıf gelirlerine bağımlılıkları nedeniyle sosyo-ekonomik anlamda eleştirildiği bir dönemdir. Bu çalışma, Tâhirülmevlevî (Mehmet Tâhir Olgun)'nin (ö. 1951) geç Osmanlı modernleşmesine entelektüel ve sosyo-ekonomik katkıları incelemektedir. Tâhirülmevlevî, vakıf gelirlerine dayanmaktan vazgeçerek girişimcilik ve gazetecilik faaliyetlerine yönelmiştir. Araştırma, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* (1912) romanı ve yayıncılık faaliyetleri üzerinden, Tâhirülmevlevî'nin tasavvufî yaşamın ilkelerini bireysel girişimcilik ve ekonomik bağımsızlık değerleriyle nasıl birleştirdiğini analiz etmektedir. Bu bağlamda, çalışmada hem dönemin başarısız reform girişimlerine yönelik eleştirileri hem de modernleşme sürecine entelektüel bir yanıt olarak verdiği katkılar tarihsel bir perspektifle ele alınmaktadır. Araştırmanın temel kaynakları arasında Tâhirülmevlevî'nin hatıratları, mektupları ve Osmanlı Arşiv belgeleri yer almakta, bu materyaller üzerinden onun bireysel girişim ve toplumsal dönüşüm arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiyi nasıl ele aldığı değerlendirilmektedir. Bu girift ilişki ağına dair tahliller ve değerlendirmeler, özellikle müellifin kendi yaşam tecrübesinden ilham alan otobiyografik romanı *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*'de belirgin bir şekilde yer bulmaktadır. Bu araştırma, Tâhirülmevlevî'nin Osmanlı toplumundaki değişimlere verdiği yanıt üzerinden, bireysel çaba ile toplumsal dönüşüm arasındaki ilişkiyi açıklamakta ve sîfî entelektüellerin modernleşmeye tepkilerine dair bir katkı sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Geç Osmanlı, Tasavvuf, Teşebbüs-i Şahsî, Tâhirülmevlevî, Matbaa.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article examines Tâhirülmevlevî, known as Mehmet Tâhir Olgun (1877-1951) after the Surname Law, as an emblematic figure embodying entrepreneurial spirit within the late Ottoman Sufi tradition.<sup>1</sup> It explores his conceptualization and critique of *teşebbüs-i şahsî* (individual initiative), drawing on a contextual analysis of his publishing activities and his novel *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* (1912).<sup>2</sup> His journey, marked by a departure from traditional Mevlevî dervish life to an engagement in journalism and civil service during the transformative Second Constitutional Era (1908-1920), reflects his response to the broader ideological shift in the Ottoman socio-economic and cultural landscape. At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Empire was at a crossroads of profound socio-political transformation alongside a cultural reawakening.<sup>3</sup> Amidst this era of turmoil and transition, Olgun emerged as a singular figure whose life and work encapsulated the tensions and possibilities of his time. Upon completing his secular education at a contemporary military academy and enduring the rigorous 1001-day Mevlevî period of service (*çile*)<sup>4</sup> by his early twenties, Tâhirülmevlevî, having become a Mevlevî Sheikh (*dede*), departed from the Mevlevî lodge (*mevlevihâne*) with the making by his own labor.<sup>5</sup>

Tâhirülmevlevî's transition from the secluded life of a Mevlevî dervish to a proactive role in journalism and literature—prior to and during the press expansion of 1908—signifies a pivotal shift toward self-reliance. His decision to relinquish the traditional reliance on endowment funds (*vakıf*) in favor of earning a livelihood through personal effort underscores his embrace of entrepreneurship, a topic fiercely debated in late Ottoman intellectual discourse.<sup>6</sup> At the time, the idea of earning money through hard work, rather than relying on state positions, was gaining attention, with intellectuals and religious scholars advocating for individual initiative and *sa'y ü gayret* (*effort and diligence*). Olgun's move exemplifies this push for an entrepreneurial mindset and self-sufficiency, particularly among Muslim men. This deliberate shift towards personal agency and independence marked not only his entry into the public sphere of journalism and discourse but also represented a strategic response to Orientalist critiques, which often framed Sufi reliance on the concepts such as divine providence (*tevekkül*), poverty (*fakr*) and contentment (*rıza*) as a contributor to the perceived economic stagnation of Muslim societies.<sup>7</sup>

1 Âlim Kahraman, "Tâhirülmevlevî", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2010), 39/407-409; İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal, "Tâhir", *Son Asır Türk Şairleri* (İstanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1970), 10/1820-1823.

2 For the new publication of the novel: Mehmet Tâhir Olgun (Tâhirülmevlevî), *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, ed. Nurcan Durmaz (Ankara: Kurgan Edebiyat Yayınları, 2014).

3 Şükür Hanoğlu, *A Brief History of the Late Ottoman Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 109-149.

4 Çile, in the Mevlevî Sufi tradition, refers to a rigorous period of spiritual trial and discipline undertaken by a dervish, often within the confines of a cell (*hücre*) in the Mevlevî lodge (*dergâh*). During this intensive spiritual retreat, which typically lasts for 1,001 days, the dervish undergoes a process of self-purification and training, aimed at cultivating spiritual awareness, humility, and servitude. The çile period involves strict adherence to practices such as extended prayer, meditation, fasting, menial labor, and service to the community, all under the close guidance of a spiritual master. T. Yazıcı, D.S. Margoliouth, and F. de Jong, "Mawlawiyya", in P. Bearman (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam New Edition Online (EI-2 English)* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

5 Mehmet Demirci, "Bir Eğitim Aracı Olarak Mevlevî Çilesi" *Mârife* 7/3 (2007), 105-22; Selçuk Eraydın, "Çile", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1993), 44/315-316.

6 For more information please see: İrfan Davut Çam, "Work hard my child, don't be a civil servant; become an entrepreneur!" New Subjects and Entrepreneurship in Textbooks from the Late Ottoman Empire", *Paedagogica Historica* 59/5 (2023), 975-992.

7 Melis Hafez, *Inventing Laziness Culture of Productivity in Late Ottoman Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 15.

In the intellectual climate of the Young Turk Era (1908–1922), reformist agendas and critical reassessments of Ottoman social and economic structures compelled figures like Tâhirülmevî to redefine their roles within society. This period saw a surge of ideas, such as those put forth by Prens Sabahaddin (d. 1948), who championed the concept of individual initiative, a socio-economic model that promoted entrepreneurship and liberal economic policies.<sup>8</sup> In response to these shifting currents, Tâhirülmevî's departure from the seclusion of Mevlevî dervish life and his decision to earn a living independently of endowment funds marked not only a personal transformation but also an alignment with a broader intellectual trend that equated personal labor and economic productivity with modernity. This alignment was further propelled by the expansion of the press following the 1908 revolution, which Tâhirülmevî utilized to establish various periodicals aimed at disseminating Sufi thought, navigating both successes and setbacks. His initial motivation to use journalism to disseminate Sufi thought and engage with contemporary socio-political discourse highlights the complex interplay between tradition and modernity. Reflecting the broader transformations of the late Ottoman period, it also demonstrates the adaptive strategies employed by Sufi figures in response to evolving societal expectations.

In the existing literature, Tâhirülmevî (Olgun) is often studied in a limited manner, primarily focusing on his works through the lenses of literary criticism, Sufi exegesis, and biographical recounting. This approach overlooks his broader contributions, particularly his engagement with the concept of individual initiative. While existing studies on his novel *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* provide detailed stylistic analysis, they have not fully appreciated Olgun's complex persona, which spans his roles as a Sufi, bureaucrat, and literary intellectual.<sup>9</sup> The present research seeks to address this gap through a historiographical exploration of Olgun's departure from traditional Sufi life toward entrepreneurship, as well as his post-1908 involvement in publishing, which culminated in his fiction. This literary work not only presents a critique of the failed initiatives of the period but also offers a veiled criticism of the naïve reform attempts during the Second Constitutional Era.<sup>10</sup>

This study seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of Olgun's intellectual and socio-economic contributions by asking: How did Tâhirülmevî's engagement with Mevlevî Sufi heritage—understood not merely as a spiritual tradition but as a dynamic, action-oriented approach—respond to accusations of Sufi 'backwardness' during a period of heightened critique?<sup>11</sup> In what ways did his integration of Sufi principles with emerging values of individual initiative and economic independence serve as a socio-political response to calls for reform and renewal? By examining how Tâhirülmevî navigated the evolving socio-economic

8 Prens Sabahaddin, "Merkeziyet ve Adem-i Merkeziyet", *Prens Sabahaddin Gönüllü Sürgünden Zorunlu Sürgüne Bütün Eserleri*, ed. Mehmet Ö. Alkan (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2007), 140-144; Rukiye Akkaya Kia, "Saraylı bir Muhalifin Siyasi Mücadelesi: Teşebbüs-i Şahsî ve Adem-i Merkeziyet Cemiyeti", *Marmara Üniversitesi Hukuk Fakültesi Hukuk Araştırmaları Dergisi* 21/2 (2015), 273-296; Şerif Mardin, "Adem-i Merkeziyet", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1988) 1/364-367.

9 The most comprehensive and guiding studies on Tâhirülmevî see Atilla Şentürk, *Tâhirülmevî Hayatı ve Eserleri* (İstanbul: Nehir Yayınları, 1991); Cavit Orhan Tütengil, *Prens Sabahattin* (İstanbul: İstanbul Matbaası, 1954).

10 A study on Tâhirülmevî's novel *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* from a historical perspective: Levent Ali Çanaklı, "Bir Sufî'nin Romanı: Tâhirülmevî ve Teşebbüs-i Şahsî", *The Journal of International Social Research* 13/69 (2020), 62-76. Also see Yakup Öztürk, "Prens Sabahaddin'den Tâhirülmevî'ye Teşebbüs-i Şahsî", *Yeni Türk Edebiyatı* 20 (2019), 209-229.

11 F. Cangüzel Güner Zülfişar, "Türkiyedeki Tasavvuf Çalışmaları Metodolojisinde Yeni Ufuk Arayışları", *JISS* 1/1 (2022), 153-159.

Ottoman landscape—drawing on Mevlvî traditions while embracing entrepreneurship and public discourse—this study argues that his life and works exemplify the adaptive responses of Sufi circles to the challenges of modernization.<sup>12</sup> Tâhirülmevlevî's personal and professional trajectories in the context of the broader ideological and socioeconomic shifts of the late Ottoman period reveals how he crafted a Mevlvî response to changing environment that emphasized action, labor, and socio-political engagement.<sup>13</sup> Through this lens, Tâhirülmevlevî's legacy can be understood as part of a larger trend in which Sufi orders sought to contribute to the reform and modernization of Ottoman society rather than retreat from it.

This study draws on a range of primary sources, including Tâhirülmevlevî's memoir *Matbûât Âlemindeki Hayatım ve İstiklâl Mahkemeleri*, his correspondence during his 1,001-day seclusion (*çile*) in the lodge as narrated in *Çilehâne Mektupları*, and his eulogy to his Sufi master Sheikh Mehmed Celâleddin Efendi (d. 1908), as well as relevant state archives such as the Ottoman Archives of the Prime Ministry (BOA).<sup>14</sup> By focusing on the period between Tâhir Olgun's establishment of his bookstore in 1889 and the publication of his novel *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* in 1912, this research conducts a close reading of these texts to explore how Olgun's articulation and practice of the concept of individual initiative, as known within the Ottoman discourse *teşebbüs-i şahsî*.

### 1. The Socio-Economic Context During the Late Ottoman Period

In the late Ottoman era, significant transformations arose from the empire's integration into the global capitalist system, the rise of middle-class values, the expansion of the state apparatus, and changes in the educational landscape that supported this evolving social order.<sup>15</sup> Two vital social groups emerged from these transformations: the non-Muslim bourgeoisie and the bureaucratic class.<sup>16</sup> However, increasing discussions among intellectuals and the state elite centered on how to cultivate a Muslim bourgeoisie, one that was not reliant on the state for its livelihood but instead economically contributed to it.<sup>17</sup> The Hamidian regime (1876–1909) emphasized economic development as a cornerstone for legitimizing its rule despite heavily

12 There has been increasing studies focusing on active involvement of Sufi figures in public life. For an overview please see: Cemal Kafadar, "The New Visibility of Sufism in Turkish Studies and Cultural Life", *The Dervish Lodge: Architecture, Art and Sufism in Ottoman Turkey*, ed. Raymond Lifchez (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 307-322.

13 Osman Gündüz, "Ahmet Midhat'tan Tâhirülmevlevî'ye, Ekonomik Sorunların Romana Yansımaları ya da Türk Düşününde Yükselen Bir Değer: Teşebbüs-i Şahsî", *Şerif Aktaş'a Armağan* (Ankara: Kurgan Edebiyat Yayınları, 2012), 224-235.

14 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki Hayatım: İstiklâl Mahkemesi Hatıraları* (İstanbul: Büyüyen Ay Yayınları, 2021); Mehmet Tahir Olgun (Tâhirülmevlevî) *Yenikapı Mevlvihânesi Postnişini Şeyh Celâleddin Efendi Merhûm* (İstanbul: Matbaa-ı Mekteb-i Sanayi, 1909); Mehmet Tahir Olgun (Tâhirülmevlevî), *Çilehâne Mektupları* (Ankara: Akçağ Yayınları, 1995); Mehmet Tahir Olgun (Tâhirülmevlevî), *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, ed. Nurcan Durmaz (Ankara: Kurgan Edebiyat Yayınları, 2014).

15 Edhem Eldem, "Ottoman Financial Integration with Europe: Foreign Loans, the Ottoman Bank and the Ottoman Public Debt", *European Review* 13/3 (2005), 431-445; Fatma Müge Göçek, *Rise of The Bourgeoisie, Demise Of Empire: Ottoman Westernization and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 3-5; Adam Mestyan, "The Muslim Bourgeoisie and Philanthropy in the Late Ottoman Empire", *The Global Bourgeoisie: The Rise of the Middle Classes in the Age of Empire*, eds. Christof Dejung and David Motadel (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), 207-228; Vedat İnal, "The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Ottoman Attempts to Catch Up with Europe", *Middle Eastern Studies* 47/5 (2011), 725-756.

16 Doğan Çetinkaya, *The Young Turks and the Boycott Movement* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2014), 14.

17 Çetinkaya points out a tension between non-Muslim merchants who came out as the winners during the process of integration to world economy and the Muslim merchants as the losing party. This discrepancy has led to a resentment which led the Community of Union and Progress (CUP) to take measures to strengthen the Muslim traders, going as far as inaugurating a boycott movement against the Greek merchants. Please see: Çetinkaya, *The Young Turks*, 16-18.



suppressing political dissent.<sup>18</sup> This focus on economic progress led to a strategic emphasis on economic education and the propagation of economic thinking, aiming to reshape the socio-economic structure by changing established mindsets and fostering a culture of productivity and hard work.<sup>19</sup> In this period of Ottoman modernization, the Islamic ethic of *sa'y ü gayret* (effort and diligence), or, *say u amel* (effort and action), gained renewed emphasis, particularly during the Hamidian era. This emphasis paved the way for the French-origin notion of individual initiative to gain prominence.<sup>20</sup>

In the intellectual climate leading up to the Young Turk revolution (1908), Prince Sabahaddin (d. 1948), credited as the *école's* inaugural advocate within the Turkish context, aspired to forge a path of refurbishment for the nation through individual initiative and decentralization. Drawing inspiration from Frédéric Le Play's (d. 1882) liberal-individualist sociology, Sabahaddin argued that the nation's revival depended on private enterprise, individual initiative, and self-government.<sup>21</sup> He believed that the continued centralization of power would stifle initiative, without which regional development—and the nation's recovery from both material and spiritual impoverishment—would be impossible.<sup>22</sup> His ideas were disseminated through two influential publications in *İkdam* (1894-1928) newspaper, where his provocative rhetoric sparked significant debate within the Turkish press. Although Sabahaddin eventually lost the backing of the Young Turks, his ideas continued to leave a lasting influence. His writings, which lauded personal effort and invoked religious references, resonated with a segment of Ottoman society concerned with economic stagnation.<sup>23</sup> His initiative aimed to reduce the dependence of Muslim men on endowments or careers within the civil service by promoting a more diversified economic environment that extended beyond the traditional bureaucratic framework.<sup>24</sup>

18 Deniz Kılınçoğlu, *Economics and Capitalism in the Ottoman Empire* (London: Routledge: 2015), 106.

19 Hafez, *Inventing Laziness*, 15; Atilla AYTEKİN, "Negotiating Religion, Moral Economy and Economic Ideas in the Late Ottoman Empire: Perspectives of Peasants and the Intelligentsia", *Reassessing the Moral Economy Religion and Economic Ethics from Ancient Greece to the 20th Century*, eds. Tanja Skambraks and Martin Lutz (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 209.

20 Against the backdrop of Orientalist critiques, which attributed the stagnation of Muslim societies to Islamic ethical principles and primary Sufi concepts like *tevekkül* (reliance on God). This advocacy, particularly pronounced during the Tanzimat era, sought to reinterpret Islamic concepts of enterprise and diligence as vital components of the empire's modernization efforts. Central to this discourse was the concept of *sa'y ü amel*. For more information, please see: Süleyman Uludağ, "Amel", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1991), 3/13-16; Süleyman Uludağ, "Tevekkül", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1991), 4/1-2.

21 Floreal H. Forni and Ada Freytes Fres, "Frédéric Le Play: A Forefather of Social Economics", *International Journal of Social Economics* 25/9 (1998), 1380-1397.

22 This model posits the individual as both an organizer and the leader of both private and official collectives, asserting the triumph of the individual over the state. Societies constituted by such families do not rely on familial or state structures for employment; the minimal presence of state officials underscores a broader disengagement from centralized services. The individual, in this context, places trust primarily in their own vigor and personal resources to achieve success in an independent profession—thus, fostering a breed of individuals who, well-informed and prepared, are adept at advocating for their rights and assuming their responsibilities, emerging as robust and energetic entities. Therefore, the Le Play school endeavored to transpose the principles of individual initiative, decentralization, and liberty into the practical sphere, employing a variety of methodologies to this end. Please see: Murtaza Korlaelçi, "Le Play Mektebi ve İlk Türk Temsilcisi Prens Sabahattin Bey", *Erciyes Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 1/1 (1983), 31-58; Hilmi Ozan Özavcı, "Liberal Thought and Public Moralists in Turkey: The Transmission of Ideas and the Conceptions of the Self 1891-1948", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 38/4 (2012), 636-657. Also see Abdullah Uçman, "Prens Sabahaddin", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2007), 34/341-342

23 Murat Kılıç, "Türk Siyasal Hayatında Bir Muhafiz İsim ve Hareket: Prens Sabahattin ve Meslek-i İçtima", *Süleyman Demirel Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi* 12 (2010), 9.

24 Şükrü Hanioglu, *Preparation for a Revolution: The Young Turks, 1902-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 91-94; Ayşe Kadioğlu, "An Oxymoron: The Origins of Civic-Republican Liberalism in Turkey", *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16/2 (2007), 171-190; Kılınçoğlu, *Economics and Capitalism*, 106.

Within the socioeconomic context that aimed to foster Muslim entrepreneurship, Sufi communities came under increased scrutiny, particularly for their perceived economic burden on urban economies.<sup>25</sup> This criticism intensified with the rise of reforms and edicts that sought to modernize Ottoman society. Sufi orders, increasingly associated with lethargy, were viewed as impediments to societal progress due to their reliance on public and endowment funds.<sup>26</sup> These critiques, rooted in sentiments that predated the Tanzimat era, were exacerbated by the appointment of hereditary cradle sheikhs (*beşik şeyhliği*).<sup>27</sup> This practice allowed access to these resources to remain within familial circles, further fueling dissatisfaction among reformist thinkers.<sup>28</sup> In fact, while the number of dervishes residing in Istanbul's lodges diminished as Sufis increasingly assumed official roles, many mystics remained steadfast in their spiritual practices, continuing their centuries-old devotion to the tekke tradition.<sup>29</sup>

These individuals, whose lives were characterized by seclusion (*küşe-i inzivâ*), increasingly faced criticism from Islamist modernists, who saw them as symbols of withdrawal from societal engagement.<sup>30</sup> Central to these critiques was the belief that foundational Sufi concepts and practices were preventing the frequenters of the lodges from actively contributing to economic development. Modernist thinkers, often drawing on Orientalist perspectives, sought to reinterpret these Sufi principles in line with progressive ideologies that emphasized active human effort (*sa'yü ü amel*), pragmatism, and intellectual engagement.<sup>31</sup> As a result, the

- 25 Throughout the Ottoman Empire until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sufism (*tasavvuf*) was characterized by the emergence of structured networks, the establishment of religious institutions through pious foundations (*vakf, evkaf*), and the ascent of affluent households and lineages within the Sufi community. Endowments played a pivotal role in disseminating Sufi teachings and practices on a broader scale and provided considerable patronage towards Sufi circles. For the history of Sufism in the Ottoman Empire please see: John J. Curry, "Sufism in the Ottoman Empire", *Routledge Handbook on Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (London: Routledge, 2021), 399-413. One of the pioneering studies exploring the history and development of Pious Foundations in the Ottoman Empire: John Robert Barnes, *An Introduction to Religious Foundations in the Ottoman Empire* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 2-3; Marinos Sariyannis, *A History of Ottoman Political Thought Up to the Early Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 262-263.
- 26 For more information, Meir Hatina, "Where East Meets West: Sufism, Cultural Rapprochement, and Politics", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 39/3 (2007): 389-409; Muhammad Zubair, "Islamic Law of Waqf: A Concise Introduction", *Arab Law Quarterly* 26/2 (2012), 121; It is noted that by 1870 there were 1826 people inhabiting the 171 Sufi lodges of Istanbul with an increasing rate until the abolishment of the lodges by the Turkish Republic in 1925. For more information, please see John J. Curry, "Sufi Spaces and Practice", *A Companion to Early Modern Istanbul*, eds. Shirine Hamadeh and Çiğdem Kafescioğlu (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 523.
- 27 Thierry Zarcone, "Shaykh Succession in Turkish Sufi Lineages (19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries): Conflicts, Reforms and Transmission of Spiritual Enlightenment", *Asian and African Area Studies* 7/1 (2007), 26.
- 28 Nathan Hofer, "Endowments for Sufis and Their Institutions", *Sufi Institutions*, ed. Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 59-60; Ahmed Akgündüz, "The Ottoman Waqf Administration in the 19<sup>th</sup> and Early-20<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Continuities and Discontinuities", *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 64/1 (2011), 71-87; These efforts reflected a broader objective to align the empire's socio-cultural practices with the imperatives of modern governance and economic rationalization, indicating a nuanced approach to integrating Sufi communities into the evolving landscape of Ottoman modernity. Adam Sabra, "Economies of Sufism", *Sufi Institutions*, ed. Alexandre Papas (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 32.
- 29 Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis, and Anti-Sufis: The Defence, Rethinking and Rejection of Sufism in the Modern World* (London: Routledge, 2013), 103. An article which presents how Sufi dervishes' paramount craftsmanship as clockmakers: Feza Günergun, "Timekeepers and Sufi Mystics: Technical Knowledge Bearers of Ottoman Empire", *Technology and Culture* 62.2 (2021): 348-372.
- 30 Manastırlı İsmail Hakki, "Vücutu'l-intibah", *Sıratmüstakim* 6/136 (1908), 85-86; Debates in the Ottoman Empire regarding protection and modernization crystallized into a 'Westernizers' versus 'Islamists' dichotomy, focusing on issues of productivity, stagnation, and conceptions of the ideal citizen. See İsmail Kara, *Din ile Modernleşme Arasında Çağdaş Türk Düşüncesinin Meseleleri* (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2016), 345-370.
- 31 Mustafa Kara, "İkinci Meşrutiyet Devrinde Dervişlerin Sosyal ve Kültürel Etkinlikleri", *Osmanlı Toplumunda Tasavvuf ve Sufiler*. ed. Ahmet Yaşar Ocak (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2014), 735-746; Kara, *Din ile Modernleşme Arasında*, 345-370; Mustafa Kara, *Metinlerle Günümüz Tasavvuf Hareketleri (1839-2009)*, (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2020), 53-57. This period of reform and modernization within Sufi practices was subtly influenced by the political climate, particularly the interactions

discourse surrounding Sufi practices and institutions became a central point of contention in debates about modernization and reform in the late Ottoman period. Sufi orders found themselves at the crossroads of traditional spiritual values and the era's demands for economic and social reform.

Building on these critiques and the modernist call for reform, bureaucratic changes aimed at strengthening the Ottoman state apparatus necessitated a reevaluation of the role of Sufi orders within the empire's bureaucratic and economic framework.<sup>32</sup> During this period, the state undertook significant measures to incorporate Sufi communities into its expanding bureaucracy, challenging their historical administrative and economic independence.<sup>33</sup> This effort involved implementing substantial changes in the administration and management of the endowment funds (*waqf*) that had long sustained these orders.<sup>34</sup>

One of the most notable bureaucratic reforms was the establishment of the *Evkâf-ı Hümayûn Nezâreti* (Ministry of Pious Foundations) in 1826 and *Meclis-i Meşâyih* (Council of Sheikhs) in 1866 created to manage the vast network of religious endowments.<sup>35</sup> This implementation marked the beginning of a new era in which the state sought to redirect the resources of these funds toward other sectors of the government. Following the Tanzimat reforms, initiated with the 1838 proclamation of the *Tanzimat Fermânı* (Edict of Gülhane), the centralization of control over waqf funds was expanded, representing a deliberate effort to ensure that their assets were aligned with the state's evolving needs and priorities.<sup>36</sup> As a result, the economic landscape for Sufi communities underwent profound changes.

Simultaneously, rising criticism directed at the Sufi community—particularly concerning their perceived economic burden—prompted some Sufi members to seek alternative sources of income beyond their traditional lodge affiliations.<sup>37</sup> This transition was marked by a significant number of Sufi figures either accepting state positions or pursuing private entrepreneurial ventures, reflecting a significant paradigm shift. The incorporation of Sufis into the state bureaucracy and their increasing participation in economic enterprises represented both an adaptation to the pressures of modernization and a response to the new socio-political

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between Sufi Sheikhs and the CUP party during the early years of the Second Constitutional period. See *ibid.* 74-75; Meir Hatina, "Where East Meets West", 389-409.

32 Brian Silverstein, "Sufism and Governmentality in the Late Ottoman Empire", *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 29/2 (2009), 171-185.

33 Hofer, "Endowments for Sufis", 59-60; Melek Cevahiroğlu Ömür, "The Sufi Orders in a Modernizing Empire: 1808-1876", *Tarih* 1/1 (2009), 70-93; Akgündüz, "The Ottoman Waqf Administration", 71-87.

34 This transition effectively positioned the Seyhulislamlik to exert influence over the appointment of Sheikhs, marking a departure from the traditional practice of hereditary succession and undermining the administrative autonomy of the lodges—an application further enhanced by the establishment of the Meclis-i Meşâyih (*Council of Sheikhs*) in 1866, please see Sabra, "Economies of Sufism", 32.

35 Erhan Bektaş, *Religious Reform in the Late Ottoman Empire: Institutional Change and the Professionalization of the Ulema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2023), 75.

36 Ömür, "The Sufi Orders", 70-93; Jonathan Endelman, "In the Shadow of Empire: States in an Ottoman System", *Social Science History* 42/4 (2018), 816.

37 During this process, many dervishes found a place for themselves in the civil service. For more information, please see: Carter V. Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Sublime Porte 1789-1922* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 204; For information of the growing capacity in civil service positions in the Empire, Karen Barkey, "The Ottoman Empire (1922-1923): The Bureaucratization of Patrimonial Authority", *Empires and Bureaucracy in World History: From Late Antiquity to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Peter Crooks and Timothy Parsons (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 107-125.

realities of the late Ottoman period.<sup>38</sup>

Within this evolving economic landscape of the late Ottoman era, Tâhirülmevlevî's transition from the solitude of Sufi life to active participation in the broader public sphere through his ventures stands as a testament to his active dialogue between traditional modalities and contemporary implementations. His deliberate move from the Mevlevî lodge into the realms of public discourse and economic self-reliance marks a significant socio-cultural evolution in Ottoman society. Tâhirülmevlevî's actions reflect a revival of the traditional Islamic ethos of *sa'y ü gayret* alongside contemporary concepts like *teşebbüs-i şahsî*. By adopting an individualistic approach to sustaining himself financially—eschewing reliance on vakıf funds—while continuing to uphold the lodge's mission of spreading Sufi teachings through modern media, such as the press, he positioned himself as an advocate for a renewed form of Sufi participation. Reflecting a broader trend within Ottoman society towards reconciling spiritual traditions with the demands of the new era, Tâhirülmevlevî's life and work thus embody a unique synthesis of Sufi spirituality and modern entrepreneurial spirit.

## 2. Being a Publisher Under the Hamidian Surveillance: Disseminating Sufi Thought without Relying on Endowment Funds

Tâhir Olgun's entrepreneurial career, which took off under Hamidian surveillance in 1899 with the opening of his bookstore, represents a significant shift away from the dervish's traditional reliance on tekke institutions for income. His journey later expanded to include prominent roles in publishing, teaching, and civil service, illustrating the multifaceted nature of his contributions. As a devoted Sufi figure, Olgun's various roles demonstrate his ability to bridge the Mevlevîye Order with his era's influential social and cultural circles. Olgun's formal education at the prestigious military school Gülhane Askerî Rüşdiyesi and Menşe-i Küttâb-ı Askerî, the latter being instrumental in preparing him for his military clerical duties, laid the foundation for his diverse career.<sup>39</sup> Upon completing his military training in 1892, Olgun embarked on a brief yet impactful career as a writing clerk for the Ministry of War. Although his tenure in this role was short, it was during this time that he developed a profound interest in Sufi literature and lyrical research, setting him on a path that would define his legacy.

It was during the Sufi lectures led by Sheikh Mehmed Es'ad Dede (d. 1911) that Tâhir Olgun's poetic talents truly began to flourish.<sup>40</sup> Through the interpretation of Celaleddin Rumi's (d. 1273) *Mesnevî* and the exploration of Persian Sufi poetry, Olgun experienced a profound shift towards a life centered on spiritual inquiry and artistic expression.<sup>41</sup> Influenced

38 This situation intensified as changing conceptions of work and idleness, spurred by intellectual debates on order and progress, began exerting a growing influence: Hafez, *Inventing Laziness*, 30; During this process, many dervishes found a place for themselves in the civil service. For more information, please see: Findley, *Bureaucratic Reform*, 204; For information on the growing capacity in civil service positions in the Empire, see Barkey, "The Ottoman Empire (1922-1923)", 107-125.

39 For information on Ottoman military education reforms, please see: Michael Provence, "Late Ottoman State Education", *Religion, Ethnicity and Contested Nationhood in the Former Ottoman Space*, ed. Jorgen Nielsen (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 119-121.

40 İbnülemin Mahmud Kemal İnal, *Son Asır Türk Şairleri: Kemâlî-Şuarâ*, ed. İbrahim Baştuğ (Ankara: Atatürk Kültür, Dil ve Tarih Yüksek Kurumu Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Yayınları, 2002), 4/1857-1862.

41 Mustafa Tatcı and Cemal Kurnaz, "Mehmed Es'ad Dede", *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2007), 28/469-470; Tâhirülmevlevî, *Şeyh Celâleddin Efendi*, 7-10; Nuri Özcan, "Mehmed Celâleddin Dede", *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*

by this intellectual and spiritual circle, he began writing and publishing poems, including Persian ones. Immersed in this literary and mystical environment, Olgun gravitated towards Sufism, initially obtaining a license to perform the Mevlevî whirling ritual and becoming a *semâzen* (whirling dervish).<sup>42</sup> His deepening connection to Sufi practices eventually led him to formally initiate into the Mevlevî order under the guidance of Shiekh Mehmed Celâleddin (d. 1908) of Yenikapı Mevlevîhâne. Under Celâleddin's spritual mentorship, Olgun completed the rigorous *çile*, a 1,001-day ordeal of Mevlevî *seyrüsülük* (spiritual journey), and subsequently earned the esteemed title of dede, both signifying his mastery within the Mevlevî order.<sup>43</sup> This period of intellectual and spiritual growth highlights Olgun's deep engagement with Sufi thought, which profoundly shaped both his poetic expression and his broader intellectual pursuits.

Indeed, the Mevlevî ordeal became a period of profound enrichment for Olgun, characterized by his enthusiastic engagement with Sufi texts—reading, composing poetry, corresponding with fellow dervishes, and immersing himself in deep contemplation. With a whimsical and witty spirit tempered by the maturity of youthful introspection, Olgun often pondered the shifting routines of life beyond the seclusion of the Yenikapı Mevlevîhâne's walls, reflecting on his place within it.<sup>44</sup> By the culmination of his spritual training this introspection led him to a pivotal decision. Upon completing his spiritual retreat at the Yenikapı Mevlevî Lodge, he chose a path of self-sufficiency, rejecting continued dependence on the lodge's endowment. In his memoirs, Olgun articulates this decision with profound sincerity, expressing his resolve to pursue a life grounded in personal effort and autonomy. He writes:

"I lingered in the solitude of the lodge's cell, yet rather than idly await mystical revelations or covet the fund meals as one might beg at the door, I resolved to carve out my sustenance through my own labor. I went as far as to render into our tongue a verse from Hafez of Shiraz: 'The jurist of the madrasa, in his inebriation yesterday, proclaimed a decree: Respect the [the ban of] wine yet consume not the wealth of endowments.'"<sup>45</sup>

Tâhirülmevlevî's reference to Hafez Shirâzî (d. 792/1390 [?]) reveals his search for a historical justification for his decision to reject endowment funds, grounding it in the early mystical tradition. By invoking Hafez, he not only found a literary source from the Sufi heritage to support his stance but also anchored his rejection of lodge funds in a well-established precedent. This invocation of a revered Sufi poet underscores a revivalist approach that Olgun later extended to the selection of his publications and the thematic focus of his writings. By returning to the core poetry of early mystics, Tâhirülmevlevî may have been seeking to revive a

(İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2007), 28/446-447.

42 This led him to a transformative pilgrimage in Mekke, Kahire, and Medine, accompanied by Esad Dede, opening doors to engage with esteemed scholars and mystics. In Mekke Şeyh Ahmed er-Rifâî recognized his dedication, granting him licenses from the Kadiriyye and Rifâiyye Sufi orders. On his return, he resigned from his civil service duty at the War Ministry and underwent training as a whirling dervish (*semâzen*) under Karamanlı Halid Dede, Yenikapı's chief whirling dervish, emerging as one of the era's most accomplished. Kahraman, "Tâhirülmevlevî", 407-409.

43 In the Mevlevî tradition, a *dede* is a spiritual figure who has completed 1001 days of service and undergone a period of spiritual ordeal (*çile*). This title signifies a higher level of spiritual commitment and responsibility within the lodge. The *dede* holds the second rank in the Mevlevî hierarchy, just below Sheikh, guiding others on the spiritual path. Please see: Süleyman Uludağ, "Dede", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1994), 9/76.

44 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Çilehâne Mektupları*, 31-33. For information on Yenikapı Mevlevîhânesi, M. Baha Tanman, "Yenikapı Mevlevîhânesi", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2013), 43/463-468.

45 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 27.

more authentic form of Sufi spiritual life—one that deviated from contemporary expectations and material dependencies.<sup>46</sup> It reflects his conviction in individual initiative, manifesting his personal determination to engage in a broader discourse on the role of individual agency within the Sufi tradition, while simultaneously challenging the prevailing critiques that assume Sufis are passive observers of a changing society.

Tâhirülmevlevî's choice to forgo a life supported by endowment funds necessitated rejecting the spiritual position at the Yenikapı Mevlevihâne, as well as the honored title of dede (*spiritual master*), a designation that would have conferred considerable status and privileges within the Sufi lodge. However, his educational background and intellectual prowess had already equipped him for another respected path: publishing. Through the medium of publishing and journalism, Olgun found a new form of tekke—this one built on paper and pen, allowing him to channel his intellectual and spiritual energies into the public sphere. Olgun's publishing career began with *Resimli Gazete* in 1899, a project undertaken with the renowned bookseller Karabet Keçişyan Efendi (d. 1911).<sup>47</sup> To support the venture, Olgun committed to supplying the paper himself and covered an additional printing cost of 200 *kuruş*.<sup>48</sup> However, his literary aspirations soon collided with the strict realities of the Hamidian regime, known for its rigorous censorship and heightened surveillance, particularly in light of the growing activities of the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP).

The regime's suspicion of dissent extended to even the most minor errors in published materials, as these were often seen as potential criticisms of the government. In one regrettable incident, a typographical error in Olgun's newspaper—where the title *padîşah-ı avâtîf-güster* (the generous sultan) was mistakenly printed as *avâif* (implying annulment or dissolution)—resulted in severe consequences.<sup>49</sup> This seemingly minor mistake was interpreted as a veiled criticism of the Sultan, marking the beginning of the end for this venture. The episode exemplifies the instability of publishing under the Hamidian regime, where even a typographical slip could bring a literary career to an abrupt halt. The typographical error in Tâhirülmevlevî's publication not only failed to pass censorship but also attracted damaging allegations from Baba Tâhir (d. 1912), the owner of *Mâlumât* newspaper, and Nazif Surûrî (d. 1935), a Council of State member. Both falsely accused Olgun of attempting to form a "Unity of Mevlevî Order Committee" through his publication, exploiting the regime's deep-seated paranoia. This suspicion was particularly potent due to the affiliation of Crown prince Reşad Efendi (d. 1918), a known Mevlevî dervish and regular attendee of the Yenikapı Mevlevî Lodge, with the order. The regime harbored fears that the Mevlevihâne network was being used as a meeting place for unionists and opponents of the government.<sup>50</sup> As state

46 For detailed information on early Sufism, Ahmet Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 87-155.

47 The document evidences that *Resimli Gazete*, which had previously been shut down (by the Hamidian government) was relaunched by Tâhir Baba (Mevlevî), a dervish of Yenikapı Mevlevihânesi, together with Hacı Karabet Efendi: BOA. Yıldız Perakende Evrakı Dahiliye Nezareti Maruzatı (YPRK.DH.) 11/17, 26 Cemâziyulahir 1317 (1 November 1899); İpek K. Yosmaoğlu, "Chasing the Printed Word: Press Censorship in the Ottoman Empire 1876-1913," *The Turkish Studies Association Journal* 27/1 (2003), 15-49.

48 Accordingly, he would provide the paper for the newspaper himself and pay an additional 200 *kuruş* for printing. Muhammed Tathisu, "Kitapçı Karabet Efendi'nin Osmanlı Matbuatına Katkıları Üzerine bir Methal", *YILLIK: Annual of Istanbul Studies* 3 (2021), 123-148.

49 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 19-20; BOA.YEE.149/74; BOA.YPRK.DH.11/17

50 Hatice Aynur, "Mâlumatçı Baba Tâhir", *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2003), 27/545-546; Tâhirülmevlevî,

surveillance intensified, Olgun's bookshop, Tâhir Dede Kütüphanesi—a library in name but a bookstore in function—became a focal point for the Hamidian police.<sup>51</sup> The constant watch and growing suspicions discouraged customers from visiting, causing the business to falter. Unable to attract patrons, Olgun was eventually forced to close the bookstore.<sup>52</sup>

Olgun's newspaper was shut down under the pretext of promoting Crown prince Reşad Efendi, a move that underscored Sultan Abdulhamid II's deep-seated fears of political affiliations within Mevlevî circles.<sup>53</sup> Olgun narrowly avoided imprisonment, thanks to the intervention of his Sufi master, Celâleddin Dede. When narrating this incident, Olgun adopts a sarcastic tone, highlighting the absurdity of the regime's paranoia. He likened the Hamidian regime to a "sharp-nailed claw" (*keskin tırnaklı pençe*), a powerful metaphor that vividly captures the oppressive and invasive nature of the government's control.<sup>54</sup> The image of a claw with sharp nails symbolizes the regime's relentless grip, always poised to strike at any perceived threat or sign of dissent. This metaphor not only illustrates how the Hamidian establishment kept its citizens under constant surveillance but also conveys the suffocating atmosphere that intellectuals like Olgun faced. The intense scrutiny and the regime's suspicion toward Mevlevî circles ultimately forced Olgun to abandon his bookstore and publishing efforts.

As it became clear to Olgun that pursuing his ambitions of individual initiative through his bookshop was no longer viable under the strictures of the Hamidian regime, he reluctantly returned to the civil service, securing a position in the Ministry of Forestry and Agriculture after passing an examination.<sup>55</sup> Concurrently, from 1903 onwards, he began teaching, initially at *Bürhân-ı Terakkî ve Rehnümâ-yı Füyûzât* as a Persian and Islamic History instructor. He eventually secured a longstanding position at the prestigious Darrüşşafaka High School for orphans, where he taught for half of his life.<sup>56</sup> These dual commitments—educational and bureaucratic—marked Olgun's reintegration into official life, contrasting with his earlier retreat from both civil service and the Sufi order. His willingness to step away from established institutions—whether from the confines of a bureaucratic clerkship or the spiritual boundaries of Sufi mastery—reflects a more profound quest for autonomy. This drive clashed with the rigid structures of the Hamidian era. Olgun's career trajectory illustrates a pattern of balancing personal independence with the pragmatic need to navigate the prevailing socio-political

"Tâhir Olgun'un Kendi Kalemîyle Terceme-i Hâli", *Edebiyat Lügati* (İstanbul: Enderun Kitabevi, 1994), 7.

- 51 For more information on press censorship under the regime, see Yosmaoğlu, "Chasing the Printed Word", 15-49. It is pointed out that during Abdulhamid II's rule, the police force was mostly an apparatus of the authoritarian nature of the Hamidian regime. Please see Noëmi Lévy Aksu, "Institutional Cooperation and Substitution: The Ottoman Police and Justice System at the Turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries", *Order and Compromise: Government Practices in Turkey from the Late Ottoman Empire to the Early 21st Century*, eds. Marc Aymes, Benjamin Gourisse, Elise Massicard (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 152; Burhan Çağlar, "A Maverick Pressman: The Personal and Professional Life of Edgar Whitaker (1831-1903)", *Kadim* 10/6 (2023), 149-174.
- 52 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 29.
- 53 Murat Akgündüz, "Mevlevîlik ve Osmanlı Padişahları", *Harran Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 18/18 (2007), 37-44.
- 54 This extended even to moments as solemn as the funeral of his Sheikh Celâleddin Efendi, where spies were reported to be compiling lists of attendees. Please see: Müzahir Kılıç, "Tâhirülmevlevî'nin 'Yenikapı Mevlevihânesi Postnişini Şeyh Celâleddin Efendi Merhûm' Adlı Eseri, *Doğu Araştırmaları* 10/2 (2012), 78-84.
- 55 Tâhirülmevlevî, "Tâhir Olgun'un Kendi Terceme-i Hâli", 7. For more information on the Ministry of Forestry and Agriculture, Erkan Tural, "Osmanlı Orman ve Maadin ve Ziraat Nezareti'nde Bürokratik Reform (1908-1914)", *Turkish Journal of History* 48 (2008), 85-115.
- 56 Tâhirülmevlevî, "Tâhir Olgun'un Kendi", 9; Darüşşafaka (abode of compassion), is a high school for orphans established in 1873 under the reign of Sultan Abdülaziz (1866-1876). For more information, please see Halis Ayhan and Hakkı Maviş, "Dârüşşafaka", *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2007), 9/7-9.

realities, ultimately highlighting the tensions between individual agency and institutional control in late Ottoman society.

### 3. Olgun in the Press Life: A Sufi Entrepreneur during the Second Constitutional Period

Tâhirülmevlevî's second phase of involvement in individual endeavors coincided with the inauguration of the Young Turk era (1908), a time marked by a significant press boom.<sup>57</sup> Freed from the strict censorship of the Hamidian regime, he became highly active in writing and managing various magazines and journals, as journalists' voices could now be heard far more freely. In his memoirs, Olgun reflects on the transformative shift in the publishing landscape following the revolution:

"Upon the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era on July 10, 1324 [1908], there was a sudden and abundant influx of publications into the press. Every day, new newspapers, magazines, books, and brochures flowed from the printing presses at Babıâli towards the city."<sup>58</sup>

The rise of the Committee of Union and Progress (*CUP*) reinvigorated the publishing industry, signaling a transformative epoch in the late Ottoman socio-political milieu. Within this environment, Sufi communities also found their voice, catalyzing a dynamic reevaluation of Sufi practices and their role in the modernizing state.<sup>59</sup> The establishment of the society *Cemiyyet-i Süfiye* and its publication of *Ceride-i Süfiye* represented a concerted effort to align Sufi traditions with the era's spirit of reform and freedom.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the formation of professional associations and the advent of Sufi-focused publications such as *Tasavvuf* and *Muhibbân* underscored this transition, highlighting a Sufi community increasingly engaged in the public discourse.<sup>61</sup> This embrace of individual initiative by the Sufi community, facilitated by expanding press freedoms and emerging new associations, marked a significant departure from traditional Sufi engagement. Sufis were no longer solely focused on spiritual seclusion but began to participate more actively in shaping public opinion and the socio-political landscape.<sup>62</sup>

In the vibrant press boom of the post-1908 period, Tâhirülmevlevî's dual cultural orientation played a pivotal role in shaping his narrative, which he used to disseminate Sufi thought through the medium of journals and his writings.<sup>63</sup> His memoir reveals that he devoted nearly all his time to literary pursuits, as reflected in his prolific output. The launch of *Rebber-i Vatan* newspaper in 1908, a project he undertook with equally enthusiastic peers, underscores his commitment to being actively involved in the rapidly evolving publishing sector. Although this venture was brief, it exemplifies Olgun's engagement with the public sphere and his determination to contribute to the flourishing intellectual environment of the time.<sup>64</sup> This phase of

57 Erol Baykal, *The Ottoman Press (1908-1923)* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 43-71.

58 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 33.

59 Baykal, *The Ottoman Press*, 43-71.

60 Mustafa Kara, "Cemiyyet-i Süfiye", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1993), 7/335; Mustafa Kara, "Ceride-i Süfiye", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 1993), 7/410.

61 Mustafa Kara, "Muhibban", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2020), 31/34-5.

62 Reşat Öngören, "Tasavvuf", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2011), 40/126.

63 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 36.

64 Şentürk, *Tâhirülmevlevî*, 20-21.



literary activity set the stage for his 1912 autobiographical novel, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, which delves deeper into his personal experiences and intellectual explorations during this transformative era.

The collapse of Tâhirülmevlevî's journalistic endeavor paved the way for his appointment in August 1908 as the chief editor of *Nekregû*, a satirical magazine founded by Midhat Rebiî. Using the pseudonym Tâhir Saffet, Olgun quickly made his mark with a series of satirical writings from the very first edition. He revived traditional dialogues reminiscent of Karagöz and Hacivat, introducing characters that humorously dissected the social and political landscape of the time.<sup>65</sup> His satirical pieces took aim at authoritarianism, the pervasive spy networks, and individuals who had collaborated with the Hamidian government, such as Nazif Surûrî (d. 1935) and Baba Tâhir (d. 1912), a prominent figure in *Mâlumât* newspaper.<sup>66</sup> Despite his criticisms, Olgun's engagement with *Nekregû* did not imply unwavering support for the Committee of Union and Progress (CUP).<sup>67</sup> His symbolic novel, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, offers a critical reflection of the failed initiatives he witnessed under the CUP, where incompetence and inexperience undermined efforts at reform. In one of his writings, he uses the metaphor of "the foxes seeing the lion in the wilderness of courage" to symbolize this anticipated revival. Olgun's satirical and literary contributions during this period reflect his nuanced stance, where he critiqued failures but maintained hope for the ideals and national renewal inspired by the reform movement.<sup>68</sup>

Tâhirülmevlevî's editorial ventures shifted from the sharp satirical tone of *Nekregû* to more earnest discourses in *Srâtımüstakim* and *Beyânülbak*, signaling his deepening engagement with the socio-political and religious tumult of the era.<sup>69</sup> Following his acquaintance with Mehmet Âkif Ersoy, Olgun began contributing to the famous Islamist weekly magazine *Srâtımüstakim* (1908–1912), where his writings reflected his growing involvement in religious and intellectual debates. Additionally, he became a regular contributor to *Beyânülbak* (1908–1912), a publication of the Cemiyet-i İlmiye-yi İslâmiyye, an association primarily composed of ulema (Islamic scholars).<sup>70</sup> His engagement with *Srâtımüstakim* continued into its later iteration, *Sebilürreşad* (1912–1924), where his writings contributed to the magazine's Islamist discourse.<sup>71</sup> Olgun's final magazine venture during the Ottoman era was *Mahfil*

65 *Nekregû*, a satirical magazine, which continued with the name *Nekregû* and *Pişekâr* and followed the tradition of *Karagöz* and *Hacivat* by assigning fictional names to characters who engage in humorous discussions about the social and political life of the era. See Salih Seyhan, "II. Meşrutiyet Dönemi Mizah Basını ve İçeriklerinden Seçilmiş Örnekler", *Turkish Studies* 8/3 (2013), 494-516.

66 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 35. For more information on Nazif Surûrî, Ozan Can Akpınar, "Osmanlıdan Cumhuriyete Tartışmalı Bir Bürokrat: Sururizâde Ali Nazif Bey (1865-1935)", *Vakanüvis-Uluslararası Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi* 8 (2023), 2119-2154; Aynur, "Mâlûmatçı Mehmed Tâhir", 545-546.

67 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 62.

68 Tâhirülmevlevî, "Sürûd-i Millet", *Srât-ı Müstakim* 4/80 (17 March 1910), 26; Tâhirülmevlevî, "Verelim Haydi Donanmaya Bütün Varmızı", *Srât-ı Müstakim* 4/83 (6 April 1910), 87.

69 Orhan Okay and Ertuğrul Düzdağ, "Mehmed Âkif Ersoy", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2003), 28/432-439; Ahmet Şeyhun, *Islamist Thinkers in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 19-26; Andrew Hammond, "Muslim Modernism in Turkish: Assessing the Thought of Late Ottoman Intellectual Mehmed Akif", *Die Welt Des Islams* 62/2 (2021), 1-32.

70 For more information on the organization and the newspaper: Halis Ayhan, "Cemiyet-i İlmiye-yi İslâmiyye", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 333-332/7, 1993; Nilay Kınay Civelek and Ayşe Ertuş, "İslamcılık Panoramasından II. Meşrutiyet Basınına Bir Bakış: Beyânü'l-Hak Gazetesi I. Cilt (İndeks ve Yazı Özetleri)", *Külliyat The Journal of Ottoman Studies* 11 (2020), 1-53.

71 *Srât-ı Müstakim* was re-named as *Sebilürreşad* in 1912. Please see the following: Adem Efe, "Sebilürreşad", *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2003), 36/251-253.

(1920–1926), a publication with a distinct Mevlevî undertone, sensitive to spiritual matters and the intricacies of Sufism.<sup>72</sup> This journal reflected Olgun's lifelong commitment to Sufi thought, intertwining spiritual and intellectual engagement with the evolving modernity of the post-1908 Ottoman society.

Tâhirülmevlevî's intellectual and literary contributions illustrate the complex interplay between tradition and modernity that defined the late Ottoman period. Navigating both religious and secular domains, his writings addressed urgent socio-political issues, particularly failures in governance and institutional integrity.<sup>73</sup> His work illustrates the fluid boundaries between spiritual thought and public critique, embodying a broader trend among intellectuals who sought to reconcile inherited values with the challenges posed by modern reforms. Şerif Mardin (d. 2017), in his analysis of late Ottoman intellectuals,<sup>74</sup> emphasizes how figures like Tâhirülmevlevî utilized their dual cultural inheritance—balancing religious tradition with modern critiques—to shape public discourse, which allowed for both the preservation of values and a forward-looking reformist vision.<sup>75</sup> It is this synthesis of critique and continuity that marked his unique contribution, offering not only a reflection on the failures of the time but also an exploration of how these failures could be understood through the lens of individual responsibility and institutional competence.<sup>76</sup> One of the most apparent manifestations of Tâhirülmevlevî's critical reflection on institutional failure is found in his novel. Through this work, he offers a detailed exploration of the incompetence that plagued various state sectors, using allegory to underscore the practical and ethical implications of this mismanagement.

#### 4. Olgun's novel *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*: Criticism and Re-Evaluation of the Concept of Individual Initiative

Published in 1912, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* represents Tâhirülmevlevî's critical exploration of the socio-political and economic challenges of the late Ottoman period, particularly during the initial years of the Second Constitutional era. Set against the backdrop of a failed

72 For more information on *Mahfil*, please see: Âlim Kahraman, "Mahfil," *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2003), 27/333-334. His contributions also appeared in *Ceride-i Süfiye* (1909-1919), a renowned Sufi journal, and in later years his writings were published in *Peyâm-ı Sabah* (1920-1922). However, he noted in his memoir that he received no payment from the latter publication. *Ceride-i Süfiye* was the longest-publishing magazine with Sufi content. For more information: Halil İbrahim Şimşek, "Türk Modernleşmesi Sürecinde Tasavvuf Alanında Ortaya Çıkan Bazı Yöntem Tartışmaları," *Hittit Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 5/9 (2006), 7-40.

73 In 1912, in *Sebilürreşad*, he engaged in a heated exchange of articles with Şahâbeddin Süleyman (d.1921) regarding the appropriateness of the literary celebration planned to be held in front of Şeyh Galib's (d. 1799) tomb according to Western customs—an engagement that reflected his nuanced approach to blending tradition with contemporary cultural practices. Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 53.

74 Şerif Mardin, *Türk Modernleşmesi: Makaleler 4* (İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1991), 11.

75 For an exploration of the dual orientations of 19th-century bureaucrats from various backgrounds—intellectuals, Sufis, and *ulema*—see: Carter V. Findley, *Ottoman Civil Officialdom: A Social History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 174-187.

76 Mardin, discusses the role of religiously informed intellectuals of the Ottoman capital, particularly those within the Mevlevî community of Istanbul. Mardin points out how these intellectuals, as part of a sophisticated urban milieu, critiqued the emerging fundamentalism of the Hâlidî Nakshibendî, which they perceived as antithetical to the broader, more tolerant values they espoused. This observation aligns with the notion of a group of Sufi intellectuals who, while grounded in traditional Sufi frameworks, engaged critically with both spiritual and socio-political currents of the 19th century, navigating a middle path between rationalization and traditional leniency. For more detailed analyses, see Şerif Mardin, *Religion and Social Change in Modern Turkey: The Case of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 120-123; Also see Stefano Taglia, *Intellectuals and Reform in the Ottoman Empire: The Young Turk on the Challenges of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2015), 80-106.

newspaper venture, the novel uses this collapse as a metaphor for the broader struggles faced by Ottoman intellectuals and entrepreneurs. Blending humor, satire, and journalistic critique, Tâhirülmevlevî examines the superficiality of both the Hamidian regime's centralized control and the Young Turks' failed reform efforts. Using the fictionalized account of the *Rehber-i Vatan* newspaper's collapse, he presents a threefold critique of the socio-political landscape. First, he reveals the superficiality of Hamidian centralization, highlighting how the state's overreach stifled genuine economic growth. Second, he critiques the Unionists' inability to dismantle their inherited systemic barriers, pointing to their failure to bring about meaningful reform. Finally, he underscores the need for professional competence and ethical integrity to foster genuine individual initiative. Through the lens of middle-class Muslim men in Istanbul, the novel highlights the gaps between reformist ideals and the practical realities of entrepreneurship, underscoring the need for competence and ethical integrity in fostering genuine individual initiative.<sup>77</sup>

Indeed, Tâhirülmevlevî's critique in the novel that points out the socio-political order is most effectively articulated through dialogues that reveal the deep-rooted censorship and systemic barriers to Muslim entrepreneurship under the Hamidian regime, where characters' frustrations reflect the superficiality of individual initiative and the pervasive inexperience of Istanbul's Muslim bourgeoisie.<sup>78</sup> A compelling moment arises when the characters attempt to secure funding for their newspaper venture. In this scene, Halis Bey laments:

“Despotism has prevented even four people from gathering to form a society; despotism is why the very idea of a company is unknown in our country. The previous era of despotism, like a long and terrifying nightmare, had descended upon the poor nation, sinking its ferocious teeth into its heart while its dreadful claws covered their eyes, and it's terrible fists blocked their mouth of complaints. Everyone writhed under the influence of this horrifying dream, but despite the pain, they could not wake up from this sleep of torment.”<sup>79</sup>

This passage serves as a searing indictment of the autocratic structure under Abdulhamid II's rule, which, in Tâhirülmevlevî's view, systematically stifled any form of collective action or entrepreneurial endeavor. Halis Bey's metaphorical language vividly portrays the suffocating grip of despotism, characterizing it as a monstrous force that paralyzed the nation's potential for progress and innovation.<sup>80</sup> Through these dialogues, Tâhirülmevlevî dissects the socio-political dynamics that stifled entrepreneurial spirit under autocratic rule. His characters' frustrations reveal a critical awareness of the structural limitations, and the culture of passivity shaped by political repression—pointing to a broader societal naiveté among would-be entrepreneurs.

In *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, Tâhirülmevlevî critiques the superficial understanding of entrepreneurship among the educated middle class in Ottoman society, exposing their lack of familiarity with the literature and practical skills necessary for successful ventures. Characters like İrfan Bey, who becomes ensnared in disputes over intellectual ownership and the concept of *sâhib-i imtiyazlık* (holder of a concession), illustrate the fluidity and ambiguity that plagued early journalistic enterprises. This lack of clarity is further highlighted by Neşati Bey, who, despite his efforts to secure financial backing from a network of collaborators, inadvertently reveals the

77 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 34.

78 Sabahaddin, “Merkeziyet ve Adem-i Merkeziyet”, 140; Atıla Doğan and Haluk Alkan, “Perception of Society and Democracy in Ottoman Liberal and Socialist Thought”, *İnsan ve Toplum* 5/10 (2016), 7-27.

79 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 72.

80 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 63, 71-72.

widespread ignorance of the organizational skills and economic savvy needed for such projects. The tension in these failed ventures comes to a head with the blunt reaction of İbrahim Ağa, an *odacı*—a servant responsible for cleaning and errands in government offices, who also doubles as a money lender with exorbitant interest rates.<sup>81</sup> His bewildered question, “*O dediğin ne oli ki?* (What is it that you are saying?),”<sup>82</sup> cuts through the lofty ambitions and exposes the collective misunderstanding among those aspiring to become modern entrepreneurs. İbrahim Ağa’s candid, outsider perspective acts as a sharp commentary on the widespread confusion and resistance to the concept of individual initiative, particularly among the middle class, who, despite their aspirations, lack the foundational knowledge and experience required for economic independence. Through these characters, Tâhirülmevlevî highlights not only the hollow ambitions of his contemporaries but also the broader societal naiveté surrounding entrepreneurship in Ottoman society. The narrative critiques not just the individuals but the systemic shortcomings that left them unprepared for the demands of modern entrepreneurial life.

Indeed, when acquaintances suggested to the protagonist Neşati Efendi, in the wake of the Constitutional era, to inaugurate a newspaper, he reflected on the zeitgeist with keen insight, musing, “Since everyone will engage in individual initiative, why should we remain inert?”<sup>83</sup> With this thought, he resolved to immerse himself in the collective fervor of the time. This moment articulated through Neşati Bey, embodies the hard-earned wisdom drawn from Tâhirülmevlevî’s own past journalistic endeavors, many of which had met with failure. The character’s decision reflects the author’s understanding of the era’s excitement surrounding individual enterprise, as well as the inherent risks and naiveté that often accompany these ventures.<sup>84</sup> Tâhirülmevlevî uses these experiences to offer a nuanced critique of the period, also revealing personal barriers that hindered success.

Through Neşati Bey’s reflections and struggles, the novel highlights the complexity of aligning personal ambitions with the practical demands of entrepreneurship. His sharp critique of his colleagues’ naive ambition to publish a magazine without adequate planning or foresight captures the essence of Tâhirülmevlevî’s own experiences and frustrations with such ill-conceived ventures. Neşati Efendi’s pragmatism is reflected in his pointed remark:

“What idealistic men you are. Let us say we have written our share of articles. How will they be published by divine will? You need an office to send drafts and organize them. Then you need a printing press for production. A press does not stamp letters on the canvas of the universe but on paper. Where is your office? Where is your printing press? You are rolling up your sleeves before even seeing the sea. Secure an office, find a press, and prepare a few issues’ worth of paper before you think about writing.”<sup>85</sup>

81 Usury (*tefecilik*), in the late Ottoman Empire, referred to the practice of lending money at excessively high interest rates, often seen as exploitative and ethically questionable. During this period, as the Ottoman economy faced various challenges, including wars, decline in traditional industries, and financial instability, usury became a significant socio-economic issue. For more information, please see Kurtuluş Demirkol, “Social Tragedy: Usury in The Ottoman Empire (1848-1864)”, *MCBÜ Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi* 16/1 (2018), 625-648.

82 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsi*, 79.

83 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Matbûât Âlemindeki*, 34.

84 As Neşati Efendi and his friends are urging to make a newspaper publication, several occasions reveal the hardships and discussions within the sector. First of all, there is a matter of financing the initiative. The issue of financing is solved through a company taking over the newspaper’s management and thus the *sahib-i imtiyazlık*, which refers to the financing company deciding on what and who can write within the paper. Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsi*, 63.

85 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsi*, 110.

In these words, Neşati Bey encapsulates not only the logistical realities of publishing but also the deeper frustrations Tâhirülmevlevî encountered in his own journalistic pursuits. The character serves as an autobiographical extension of the author, channeling his experiences and reflections on the impracticality of ventures born out of enthusiasm but lacking proper planning. Neşati Bey's engagement with both Sufi and bureaucratic circles mirrors Olgun's dual affiliations. His deep understanding of each realm's cultural and social protocols reflects Olgun's active dialogue with these two worlds. Tâhirülmevlevî, like his protagonist, navigated the spiritual world of the Sufi lodge and the modern demands of the bureaucratic and literary elite.<sup>86</sup> Far from being confined to the traditionalist limits of the lodge, Neşati Bey—and, by extension, Olgun himself—embraces the era's challenges, demonstrating a forward-looking spirit that critiques both the inertia of the past and the idealism of the present.

The deliberations over the newspaper's naming process within *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*—culminating in the choice of *Reh-nûmâ-yı Memleket* (Guide of the Country)—symbolize a profound commitment to guiding and enlightening the *halk* (folk) through the murky waters of the reform era. The chosen name reflects Tâhirülmevlevî's vision of the press as an instrument of illumination, a conciliatory force that can lead society toward clarity amidst confusion.<sup>87</sup> This idealistic vision, however, is tempered by the author's critique of the very intellectual class seeking to carry out this mission. In the narrative, criticism of “the folk” is subtly directed inwardly toward Neşati Bey and his peers, who may lack a complete understanding of their monumental task. Neşati Bey's literary inclinations, along with his critical stance on the quality of teaching and the poetic endeavors of his contemporaries, provide a more profound critique of the intellectual and cultural stagnation perceived within specific segments of Ottoman society. His poetic ventures within the novel serve as a scathing commentary on the Ottoman administration's bureaucratic deficiencies, educational shortcomings, and arbitrary appointments. Through Neşati's reflections, Tâhirülmevlevî critiques the system's inadequacies, underscoring his desire for a society built on justice, fairness, and aesthetic integrity. The poem included in the novel encapsulates this critique:

“Whoever has a homeland, it is the same as their own soul,  
The ground they walk on is the blood of the oppressed.

Oh, my Lord, what is this unceasing and undeniable charm?  
The Ottoman realm is a realm of trials within the world.

With fire, with sickness, with injustices, with ignorance.  
It is desolated today, like the evening nest of a bird.”<sup>88</sup>

86 Tâhirülmevlevî, “Tâhir Olgun'un kendi kalemiyle terceme-i hâli”, 7.

87 When the discussion continued in the coffeehouse, a suggestion for naming the newspaper came from an older person present there: “Gentlemen! If you accept my humble suggestion, name your newspaper Guide of the Country (*Reh-nûmâ-yı Memleket*) and strive to guide the country and the nation. These poor people, who believe every word and fall for every offer, truly need guidance. May the Almighty bless your efforts and grant you success in life.” Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 60.

88 “Bi-kes vatan ki ayn-ı cânıdır/ Seyrâb eden zemîni mazlum kanıdır  
Yâ Rabbi nedir bu cilve ki bi-faşl u inkitâ/ Osmanlılık cihânı musâib cihânidir  
Yangınla, hastalıkla, mezâlîmle, cehl ile/ Viranedir ki yevm ü gurâb âşiyânidir.”  
Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 121.

In these lines, Tâhirülmevlevî conveys the profound disillusionment with the state of the Ottoman realm, portraying it as a land burdened by oppression, ignorance, and decay. The metaphor of the homeland being as sacred as the soul yet drenched in the blood of the oppressed highlights the stark contrast between idealized patriotism and the grim realities of governance and societal injustice.<sup>89</sup> Neşati Efendi, embodying both the spiritual depth of Sufism and the pragmatic realities of bureaucratic life, emerges as a symbol of integrity and moral fortitude. He stands as a figure committed to societal betterment and the dissemination of knowledge, continuously guiding young and inexperienced individuals in their journalistic endeavors. Through this character, Tâhirülmevlevî reflects his profound commitment to intellectual integrity and societal reform, emphasizing the role of the press in fostering critical engagement and nurturing a more enlightened society amidst systemic and societal decay.

In *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, the contrasting characters of İrfan and Ferdi Bey serve as narrative tools through which Tâhirülmevlevî skillfully explores the dilemmas confronting the Late Ottoman intellectual and social landscape. İrfan Bey, a key figure in establishing the newspaper, epitomizes the era's fraught relationship with merit and justice. Manipulating facts for personal gain, he starkly contrasts the ideals of individual initiative that the novel champions.<sup>90</sup> İrfan's lack of integrity and his unscrupulous pursuit of success reflect the broader societal struggle between public personas and private virtues, highlighting the difficulty of embodying high-minded principles in an era of political and social turmoil. Tâhirülmevlevî's critique of İrfan reveals a deep concern with the erosion of ethical standards in the public sphere, exposing the gap between the lofty rhetoric of reform and the self-serving practices of those in power. In contrast, Ferdi Bey represents the underappreciated intellectual whose vast knowledge and eloquence go unrecognized due to systemic injustice.<sup>91</sup> While Ferdi Bey embodies the potential for genuine intellectual and social progress, he is marginalized by the same system that rewards opportunism and mediocrity, as exemplified by İrfan Bey. Through Ferdi, Tâhirülmevlevî critiques the failure of Ottoman society to nurture and elevate its true intellectuals, instead privileging those who manipulate the system for personal gain.

The juxtaposition of İrfan and Ferdi Bey thus mirrors the broader societal tensions between superficial success and genuine intellectual merit, encapsulating the challenges faced by those striving to uphold ethical standards in a time of upheaval. By weaving together personal stories with the socio-political structures of the late Ottoman period, Tâhirülmevlevî masterfully highlights the dissonance between individual capabilities and societal acknowledgment, emphasizing the critical role of justice—both personal and systemic—in the realization of genuine individual initiative. Characters like Ferdi Bey, who possess intellectual Brilliance yet remain unrecognized within the bureaucratic and journalistic spheres, serve as poignant commentary on the era's failure to appreciate true merit and competence. Through these characters, Olgun underscores the argument that a comprehensive understanding of *teşebbüs-i şahsî* requires not only individual talent but also supportive

89 The concept of *vatan* (homeland) became increasingly operational in late Ottoman intellectual discourses see Behlül Özkan, *From the Abode of Islam to the Turkish Vatan: The Making of a National Homeland in Turkey* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 56-101.

90 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 63.

91 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 25-35.

socio-political structures. The novel critiques a system that, rather than fostering intellectual and entrepreneurial potential, stifles it with systemic injustices, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and superficial reforms.<sup>92</sup>

In *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, Tâhirülmevlevî masterfully critiques the barriers that stifled individual endeavors during the seemingly free environment of the Second Constitutional Era. Through subtle reflection in the novel, he portrays the CUP as an amateur group ill-equipped to manage the initiatives they undertook as a government. According to Olgun, the incompetent implementation of the constitutional system, coupled with a superficial appropriation of imported concepts, significantly undermined the effectiveness of the CUP governance. This critique is especially pointed when considering that Prince Sabahaddin's emphasis on individual enterprise revolved around decentralization, whereas the CUP increasingly centralized power, betraying their initial rationale.<sup>93</sup>

The primary motto of the Young Turk Revolution (1908) was the proclamation of liberty (*îlân-ı Hürriyet*), and their main critique of Abdulhamid II's reign was the sultan's tyrannical policies, which they believed had contributed to the empire's decline.<sup>94</sup> However, Olgun's critique of the CUP's superficial commitment to freedom and progress mirrors the challenges surrounding *teşebbüs-i şahsî* in the novel. He subtly illustrates how the Unionists', members of the CUP, failed promises of liberation and rights post-constitutional revival reflected a disconnect between rhetoric and reality. The novel draws parallels between the individual and collective struggles for genuine autonomy and initiative, echoing Prince Sabahaddin's criticism of the Unionists' shallow approach to reform.<sup>95</sup> Olgun further draws a comparison between the Hamidian regime and the Unionist government, both of which failed to uphold the principle of meritocracy. This idea is encapsulated in the passage that describes Ferdi's inadequate salary despite his talents: "This situation does not show Ferdi's impotence, but that the age of tyranny and its imitator is not very competent."<sup>96</sup> In this veiled statement, Olgun subtly refers to the Hamidian regime as a period of tyranny while labeling its "imitator"—the CUP government—as similarly unskilled. The deeper implication is that the failure to cultivate a culture of individual initiative and self-reliance among the populace stems from the ineffectiveness of these two regimes in succession.

In the novel, Tâhirülmevlevî navigates the challenges of personal initiative within a socio-economic landscape marred by moral decay and systemic inefficiencies in late Ottoman

92 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 30-40.

93 Uçman, "Prens Sabahaddin", 342-341.

94 Erik Zan Zürcher, "The Young Turk Revolution: Comparisons and Connections", *Middle Eastern Studies* 55/4 (2019), 484-486.

95 Prens Sabahaddin believed that a society's development hinged on individual initiative and decentralization. He argued that centralized systems stifled progress, and for true development to occur, individuals needed the freedom and autonomy to pursue their enterprises. It is evident from Olgun's activities and stance towards earning his own income in line with the principle of personal initiative. However beyond this apparent link, it is an interesting political connection considering that Prince Sabahaddin represented an oppositional figure towards the CUP and had been primarily associated with his formation the Personal Endeavour and Society of Decentralization (*Teşebbüs-i Şahsî and Adem-i Merkeziyet Cemiyeti*) established in 1906 in Paris. In his articles published in *Terakki* Prince Sabahaddin emphasizes that the views of the Unionists (*İttihadçılar*) on freedom and equality, under their general name, lack political and social content, and he mentions that these demands remain only on paper. According to him, the desire for constitutional rule, unless filled with substance, cannot bring about the social and economic transformation of this political change. In his view, the CUP mistakenly consider working against Abdülhamid II as "freedom advocacy" and speaking of reforms as progressivism (*terakki*). Prens Sabahaddin, "Merkeziyet ve Adem-i Merkeziyet", 140-144.

96 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 36.

society.<sup>97</sup> He identifies several obstacles to genuine entrepreneurial success, including individual inertia, ethical contradictions, and neglecting fundamental values like justice. Throughout the novel, Tâhirülmevlevî highlights professional competence and moral integrity as the twin pillars necessary for meaningful reform and progress. One striking episode involving the missteps of a printing house powerfully illustrates the interconnected issues of competence and ethics. When newspaper printing fails due to poor-quality craft and careless errors, Neşati Bey's frustration encapsulates the challenges faced by those attempting to operate within a flawed system. His exasperated remark, "Good grief, it is better to delay the newspaper for a week than to pay more and receive a half-baked product,"<sup>98</sup> reflects the disillusionment with a system where moral failings and lack of accountability consistently undermine professional standards. This episode serves as a pointed critique of the entrenched system in which ethical lapses and inadequate oversight prevent the successful implementation of reforms. Tâhirülmevlevî uses this moment to reveal that the careless handling of the newspaper's production symbolizes a broader societal malaise, where moral failings and incompetence impede any severe attempt at progress.

In the novel, the character of Gabinyan Efendi, the printer, becomes a focal point for Tâhirülmevlevî's critique of the broader decay in late Ottoman society. Gabinyan's dismissive attitude toward his incompetence—trivializing glaring errors as "minor mistakes" and refusing to reprint the flawed newspaper, claiming his fee was earned simply because the work had been physically executed—serves as a powerful metaphor for the absence of a meritocratic ethos. This interaction epitomizes a system where the semblance of labor substitutes for actual quality or integrity, highlighting a profound societal problem: superficial accomplishment is privileged over substantive, ethical practice. Tâhirülmevlevî's choice to emphasize this episode is deliberate, using Gabinyan Efendi's opportunism to critique a socio-political structure that neglects the importance of merit and accountability. The episode encapsulates a broader socio-political malaise, calling for a system grounded in meritocracy. By juxtaposing the sincere but inexperienced Neşati Bey with the opportunistic Gabinyan Efendi, Tâhirülmevlevî illustrates a society at a crossroads, torn between the sincere desire for progress and the pervasive corruption that hinders true reform.<sup>99</sup>

This critique, framed within a literary context, resonates with a Sufi perspective on the socio-moral decay lamented by many late Ottoman intellectuals. Tâhirülmevlevî's emphasis on personal initiative, rooted in integrity and competence, offers a more profound critique of the misguided Westernization and moral confusion of the period—a theme prevalent in late Ottoman novels.<sup>100</sup> Rather than advocating for a simplistic return to Islamic values, Tâhirülmevlevî presents a more nuanced call for reform that integrates ethical governance with professional meritocracy. His narrative aligns with a Sufi commentary on the period's complex

97 In fact, these statements refer to the ideas of personal initiative, morality, integrity, and merit as expressed by his spiritual master in Tâhirülmevlevî's work *Sheikh Celâleddin Efendi Merhûm*, which intertwines his own life story with the biography of his Sheikh. The emphasis is on the connection between personal initiative and ethical integrity. As noted in the work: without a foundation of personal justice, no achievement can be sustained. It is only through the establishment of personal justice that malice, envy, corruption, and deceit can be overcome Kılıç, "Şeyh Celâleddin Merhûm", 100.

98 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsi*, 168.

99 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsi*, 168-178.

100 The shallowly westernized *alafranga* figure who is prevalently criticized in late Ottoman novels, is a character who unquestionably adopts Western manner at the expense of his authentic features: Nurdan Gürbilek, "Dandies and Originals: Authenticity, Belatedness, and the Turkish Novel", *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102/2 (2003), 599-628.



socio-political and economic landscape. His vision for reform calls for a synthesis of ethical practice and competence, a balanced approach to modernization that retains the moral underpinnings necessary for true societal advancement.<sup>101</sup> A close reading of *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* reveals Tâhirülmevlevî's strategic use of dialogue to explore the intricate link between morality and societal advancement. The novel's central themes—justice, autonomy, and the pursuit of individual initiative—not only reflect the socio-political context in which Tâhirülmevlevî operated but also address enduring concerns of human endeavor and social development. These themes are deeply rooted in the moral fabric of the novel, where the pursuit of personal and collective progress is inextricably tied to ethical behavior and justice. Through its combination of Sufi wisdom and social critique, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî* emerges as a groundbreaking work of literature. Tâhirülmevlevî masterfully re-evaluates the persistent difficulties of aligning one's actions with moral values in pursuing social change and advancement. His narrative weaves together historical critique and spiritual insight, offering a profound meditation on the challenges of balancing personal ambition with ethical responsibility. Tâhirülmevlevî underscores the indispensable role of ethics in navigating the tumultuous waters of change and progress. His narrative reflects a deep awareness that without a solid moral compass, neither individual initiative nor social advancement can be genuinely successful. Tâhirülmevlevî's integration of Sufi wisdom with a critique of contemporary social and political issues makes the novel a timeless exploration of how moral integrity must underpin efforts toward autonomy, justice, and individual initiative for true advancement to occur.<sup>102</sup>

Olgun's closing statement in the novel, where he reflects on the newfound terminology of the early constitutional era—particularly the concept of individual initiative—goes far beyond a simple lesson learned from failed entrepreneurial attempts. His observation is that “in the early days of constitutionalism, we learned many words (...) we had not previously known, except their literal meanings... One of these was personal initiative... Through experience, we understood that incompetence in personal initiative leads to failure”<sup>103</sup> carries a resonant critique of the broader socio-political landscape of the late Ottoman Empire.

Tâhirülmevlevî's critique operates on multiple levels, not merely reflecting individual failings but addressing the deeper structural weaknesses of a society unprepared for the rapidly changing socio-economic landscape of the constitutional period. His narrative highlights a critical tension: while the rhetoric of innovation and reform was pervasive, the necessary institutional and ethical frameworks to support such transformations were conspicuously absent. In Tâhirülmevlevî's view, the failure of individual enterprise was not simply the result of personal shortcomings but rather the inevitable outcome of institutional inadequacies. His critique gains further weight when considering that it comes from a Sufi—a member of a group often criticized for being resistant to reform and disengaged from the socio-economic realities of the time.

101 Preserving morality while adopting to the westernization current of the era has been a topic of wide discussion among the late Ottoman intellectuals: Çiğdem Oğuz, “We Will Adopt the Technology of Europe but not European Morality: The Quest for Authentic Values in Late Ottoman Politics”, *Reconsidering Europeanization: Ideas and Practices of (Dis-) Integrating Europe Since the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Florian Greiner, Peter Pichler and Jan Vermeiren (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 110-130.

102 This narrative can also be seen as Tâhirülmevlevî's attempt to provide a Sufi critique of corruption, diverging from the era's dominant narrative focus on family or women by instead highlighting the ethical degradation within professional environments and organizational structures.

103 Tâhirülmevlevî, *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, 179-180.

## CONCLUSION

Tâhirülmevlevî's intellectual journey, rooted in the Sufi tradition yet actively engaging with the socio-political dynamics of the late Ottoman period, offers a unique perspective on the interplay between tradition and contemporary reform implementations. His shift from the Sufi lodge to the broader public sphere, through publishing, journalism, and literary work, reflects his embrace of *teşebbüs-i şahsî* (individual initiative) as a pathway to individual and societal reform. In his novel *Teşebbüs-i Şahsî*, Tâhirülmevlevî critiques the structural failures of both the Hamidian and Second Constitutional eras, especially the implications of Committee of Union and Progress (CUP), emphasizing the lack of ethical integrity and institutional competence as crucial barriers to meaningful progress. His analysis reveals how superficial reforms, unsupported by a more profound commitment to ethical and moral principles, ultimately stifled genuine advancement.

His life and works stand as a poignant commentary on the broader challenges of reform and the complex interplay between tradition, morality, and progress in late Ottoman society. What is particularly striking—and deeply ironic—is that this incisive critique emerges from a Sufi, a member of a community traditionally cast as an impediment to reform and out of touch with the socio-economic transformations of the era. Tâhirülmevlevî, having stepped beyond the spiritual confines of the Sufi lodge to engage directly with state-led reform efforts, becomes a critical voice in assessing their shortcomings. His critique, however, is not reactionary; instead, it draws from the ethical and moral frameworks that had long been embedded in Ottoman thought. The irony here is profound, the very critiques of modernization, reform, and individual initiative often came from those the reformist elite saw as peripheral or even counterproductive to the state's progress. By invoking timeless ethical principles, Tâhirülmevlevî presents a vision of reform that extends beyond the technical or political, stressing the indispensable role of moral integrity, institutional preparedness, and a more profound engagement with enduring societal values. The Sufi intellectual, often marginalized in reformist discourse, emerges here as a critical voice thereby revealing the deeper complexities of the late Ottoman era.

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