

SOCIETY-CONSTRUCTION IN MEHMET AKİF ERSOY'S LITERARY OPUS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with one of the most prominent Turkish poets of the last century, Mehmet Akif Ersoy whose worldwide sociological dimension is appreciable. It is a micro social hermeneutic on the Akif's societal engineering based on Islamic tradition and its value system, opposite to racial-nationalism, caesarism and despotism, the social deviations of his Zeit as alienation, atheism, defeatism etc. Akif, through his poetical discourse, tried to save and affirm the spirit of solidarity and of the universal Islamic community (ummah), to affirm the idea of authentic identity based on spirituality, morality, patriotism and knowledge. In sum, this article is a synopsis of Ersoy's poetic vision, functionalist social philosophy, constructivist ethical-cultural approach and pro-active lifestyle that emanates in his magnum opus Safahat.

Keywords: Sociological Poetry, Traditionalism, Islamism, Anti-Secularism, Ummatism.

MEHMET AKİF ERSOY'UN EDEBİ ESERLERİNDE TOPLUM İNŞASI

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, dünya çapında sosyolojik boyutu takdir edilen, bir önceki yüzyılın önde gelen Türk şairlerinden Mehmet Akif Ersoy ile ilgilidir. Bu çalışma Akif'in İslâm geleneğine ve değerlerine dayalı olan ve ırkı milliyetçiliğe, mutlakiyetçiliğe ve zorbalığa karşı Zeit'in sosyal sapma, ateizm, bozgunculuk vb. gibi karşı mikro düzeyde toplumsal mühendislik projesi olarak yorumlanmasıdır. Akif, şiirsel söylem yoluyla, dayanışma ve evrensel İslam yorumu (ümme) ruhunu kurtarmaya ve maneviyat, ahlak, vatansızlık ve bilgiye dayalı özgün kimlik fikrini teyit etmeye çalıştı. Özetle, bu makale Ersoy'un şiirsel vizyonu, işlevselci sosyal felsefesi, onun şaheseri Safahat içinde yayılan yapılandırmacı etik-kültürel yaklaşım ve proaktif bir yaşam tarzının bir özetidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyolojik Şiir, Gelenekselcilik, İslamcılık, Anti-Laiklik, Ümmetçilik.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of humanity has seen major figures who with their views and vision have left deep traces in the courses and social development of a community, but it has also seen some giants who have surpassed their geography and blood boundaries to become a heritage of humanity, a colossus of the human race. Such is Mehmed Akif (1873-1936), a monumental poet and thinker who has inspired the cause of a nation and a faith community (*ummah*), a giant of spirit, personality, character and morality, a great idealist and one of the “constellation of Albanian writers who gave major works to the Ottoman culture.”¹ As a “child of catalysms”, one who has experienced the sadness of the disintegration of a mega-empire, Mehmed Akif was treated improperly for a period in Turkey and in other Ottoman lands for ideological reasons but he is noted in the Turkish and Albanian history as the man who knew to speak his word in his time. The need for his discourse is particularly evident in our time, when a serious national and worldwide Islamic crisis is going on. But that cataclysm made him more mature, driving him to search for the causes and solutions. He has experienced the frustration and deep sorrow of the collapse of his ideals. We can say that his environment and the education he received have had a great influence in his development as a poet, as a man and as a society-builder through poetic discourse. In his masterpiece *Safahat* he has eternalized the periods of Ottoman society he experienced.²

1. *SAFAHAT: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS AND EPOS*

There is a consensus opinion that the magnum opus of Mehmed Akif is the poetic work “Leaves” (or “Periods”). This voluminous book of Akif is a true sociological epos, an alternative sociology expressed through poetic words but with thoroughly sociological analysis, with real dealings of genuine social engineering. “Dealing with sociology means having a dynamic spirit, dealing with social change, with developments of society, trying to understand, to interpret and describe the social sphere objectively“. Here it is what Akif exactly did. What the Pejani (Akif was from Pejë, Kosovo by origin) makes is a biographical analysis; he examines the link between social manifestations, political events, living conditions etc.. Knowing well the ethno-psychology of Ottoman society, he passes to social facts, in what he saw with a sociologist’s eyes, through the method nicknamed “eyes and ears.”

¹ Mehmed Akif, *Fletët (Safahat)*, Logos-A, Skopje, 2009, *Foreword*.

² “On Prof. Dr. Suleyman Hayri Bolay and his thoughts about Mehmet Akif”, <http://yayim.meb.gov.tr/dergiler/sayi73/soylesi.pdf>, (02.03.2011).

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... hayal ile yoktur benim alışverişim
İnan ki her ne demişsem görüp de söylemişim.
(...with fancy nothing I have to do
Believe me whatever I said I saw it).³

This work actually expresses his breath for dealing with "social diseases", shows his sensitivity and social opposition, which is best seen in his opposition to the regime of Abdulhamid II by demanding a system based on Islamic tradition and on solidarity and freedom.⁴ Ersoy is a social poet, he takes the subjects he deals with from social reality. He does not make *art for art* but for his fatherland and his people. It seems it was his passion to tell all his experience through poetry. Akif is a poet who rejoices and weeps with the joy and tears of the people. *Safahat* is a narrative on the state of Ottoman-Turkish-Islamic society between 1908-1923, in all its dimensions. Besides being the author of the Turkish national anthem and spiritual leaders of the Turkish Liberation War, he is also known as a Muslim intellectual, and Islamist poet, as the strongest and most prominent representative of the Islamist movement⁵ at the time when three forms of policy were competing (Yusuf Akçura: Islamism, Turkism and Ottomanism). At that time the economic, political and social defeat that Islamic communities suffered due to technological backwardness were the main topics of the intellectuals at that time. While a part of the "elite" stood for complete imitation of Western civilization and culture, the Islamists stood for the adoption of technology while preserving the loyalty to and genuine connection with Islamic sources and the tradition, arguing that the causes of backwardness were the deviance from authentic Islam and the misunderstanding of it.⁶ According to Mehmet Akif the word should explain the ideal, the substance which a people aims and strives for. *Periods* are a reflection on the symbol of faith and rebelling will.⁷

Expressed in Weber's sociological terminology, Akif holds the idea of selective affinity by demonstrating the interdependence of an economic status, a political one and of a religious practice, which form a cultural (civilizational)

³ *Fletët*, p. 320.

⁴ Okay, M. Orhan – Düzdağ, M. Ertugrul, "Mehmet Akif Ersoy", *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, vol. XVIII, Ankara 2003, p. 436.

⁵ Ekmeleddin, İhsanoglu, *Historija osmanske države i civilizacije – II*, IRCICA & Orijentalni Institut u Sarajevu, Sarajevo, 2008, p. 383.

⁶ Ezel Erverdi and others (ed.), *Türk Dili ve Edebiyatı Ansiklopedisi*, Dergah Yayinlari, vol. III, p. 75.

⁷ Erverdi, p. 76.

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complex that advances the various socio-cultural spheres.⁸ He insisted on a "collective action" encouraging anyone who he saw as fit and capable to work in the way of service to the people and nation.⁹ He advocated permanent activity and social dynamism:

*There's not a moment for you to sit and rest
To walk you have, forsaking peace with what you had and will!*¹⁰

He appreciated the producing social actors (generative actors) who are encouragers of social change and promoters of cultural changes while they (re)define cultural norms.

He showed great respect for the elite and intellectuals, describing them as perfect figures, the hope of the nation, candles of education. Ersoy laments over Ibrahim Bey, one of the rare erudite and virtuous people raised from the pure soil of the East, pointing out that if this great man who knew the languages of the East in a literary level, who had correctly learned French and Russian, were not by nature a friend of simplicity and an enemy of fame, would not die in a hospital of the poor.¹¹

*With your sunset the world in darkness dwells today
And those playful dawns are not to raise again!¹²
Why did you decline so soon, o star of the East
While this land perfection had yet to understand!¹³*

In the meanwhile, he advocates an organic link between the elite and masses or popular crowds. He says that the crowd, with the *masses it takes*, brings down any violence and tyranny.¹⁴

He is against cultural degeneration, against the replacement of traditional beliefs and behaviors with beliefs and behaviors of the dominant culture and against the injection of values, thoughts, beliefs and other social and cultural forms.

He was against anomie, Durkheim's concept that has to do with social situations in which disorders of public awareness, absence, suspension or inefficiency of norms, laws, rules and social values occur, leading to

⁸ Pajaziti, Ali, *Fjalor i sociologjisë*, Logos-A & UEJL, p. 20

⁹ *Fletët*, foreword.

¹⁰ *Fletët*, p. 172.

¹¹ *Fletët*, p. 156.

¹² *Fletët*, p. 158.

¹³ *Fletët*, p. 159.

¹⁴ *Fletët*, p. 171.

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disorganization and instability in society. He rejects social disorganization as a structural social condition of depravity and disorder, caused by rapid changes in institutions, norms and values of a social trunk, by the collapse of the pillars that hold a stable society. He is against laziness, which he connects with lost high values, with destroyed wealth and happiness. He describes this pathological condition in the following verses:

*The neighborhood café is the killing element of the East
It's exactly like those old swamps.
The poor late people is buried alive,
Its conscience quelled in that hole and then it dies...¹⁵*

He wants to save the future generation from this state of social coma that the Ottoman society was going through at the time and says "Even if you put yourself in fire don't you burn your son!" He is against social defeatism and desparation, being optimistic about positive changes that may occur in the future. He addresses the man of the time with this message:

*No! Break off the chains to your determination first!
Don't say: "It's over now, no ending to resistance!"
Don't step back, o people, don't lose your faith!"¹⁶
I had faith and didn't my determination falter- he says.*

*Because for the truth to come out
Success quest is required, determination
And quest and determination success require
And determination cannot do without aim!*

The poet praises patriotism, love for fatherland and the old generations:

*Manhood and bravery used to flow instead of blood,
Instead of life, desire for death was in hearts.*

The family as the smallest structure that has preserved its value throughout history is considered by Mehmed Akif as the core of every society, the space where social health, individual and collective satisfaction is materialized: *Family life, the most pleasant life in the world¹⁷*; the education and formation of personality with the family must start: *Education must start from the family, my son!* He laments over the collapse of the family and degeneration of family values:

¹⁵ *Fletët*, p. 211.

¹⁶ *Fletët*, p. 305.

¹⁷ *Fletët*, p. 212.

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*“Otherwise, if God forbid family collapses
Not the strongest arms could raise it anymore!”¹⁸*

With a harsh language Akif has criticized those who try to make revolution in the family structure. According to him they will become desparate and dishonored.

Akif is a sworn enemy of ignorance. He had the opinion that the society cannot live without knowledge and culture. He ascribed importance to the imperatives of the century, youth and future. He was an enemy of poets and writers who lead their people and nations astray.¹⁹ He asked, “why ignorant could not learn life education?” The son at least should become a man and not remain an ignorant!²⁰ He stands for a society of knowledge and science, similarly to Comte wants a triumph over ignorance and conjecture. He calls the ignorant a deviant:

*Never can the ignorant to the learned be equal
Blind he is, the straight path unable to find!²¹*

2. THE RELATION BETWEEN VALUE SYSTEM AND SOCIAL ISSUES: RELIGION, MODERNITY, NATIONALISM AND MORALITY

Religion is part of the human being as “incurable religious” (Šušnjić) and a “animal metaphysicum” (Schopenhauer). It can be said that Akif is a religio-centrist poet and in his corpus, speaking with Bellah’s words “religious symbols are seen as expressions of the irreducible reality, the expression of the particular reality”, and religion is seen as “the whole of symbolic forms and acts which bind man to the basic conditions of his existence”.²² Religion is one of the basic concepts which Akif deals with and has the highest consideration about. Religion, similar to Durkheim’s thought, is the source of all social institutions. Akif is against atheism which he calls a new religion, or a pseudoreligion (*For a new faith atheism humanity knows*²³) whose proliferation causes serious problems for individual lives as well as for social life. He criticizes Tefvik Fikret’s work *Tarihi Kadim* (Ancient History, 1905) as a “blasphemic treatise” which left deep impressions on the intellectuals and young people who read it at the time and which “plucked the faith from the hearts of babies!” He calls blasphemy as darkness. He says that “to break through with everything in the

¹⁸ *Fletët*, p. 313.

¹⁹ *Fletët*, foreword.

²⁰ *Fletët*, 139.

²¹ *Fletët*, 245.

²² Pajaziti, *ibid*, p. 70-71.

²³ *Fletët*, p. 256.

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way of progress, the guide should be the quality of man's spiritual nature," that without it, the hope for salvation is in vain!²⁴

*Religion it is, the society that keeps;
No other bind except it!
O you people who each other embrace for Aid
What's the bind that people keeps tied?
To your share this religion was;
And if it's gone, gone your are!*²⁵

He connects religion to the value system, to society's moral and ethical background and says that the main source of morality is devotion, dedication for and fear from the Creator:

*Neither culture, nor conscience keeps moral high
From fear of God virtue only stems.*

Mehmet Akif sees religion as social cement without which society would collapse, he considers it as a collective representation, as a social compass, and its misuse as a way toward the abyss. It is this consideration for religion that made him leave the translation of Quran to an al-Azhar scholar²⁶ to burn it fearing that secular republican government of Turkey might impose it to the nation in their daily prayers.²⁷ That was the religious and social conscience of a colossus like Akif.

Akif was a sworn moralist who regards morality and ethics as the substance of proper society-building. He complains about and looks for a loophole from the social deviations of the time as alcoholism, adultery, gambling, thinning of marriages ...

*What's else about poetry and youth, except for beer and adultery?
Wanderers: nobody a profession has, no moral too;
All philosophers are though nobody to school has gone!²⁸
All kind of infections: fever, prostitution, drinking, gambling.²⁹*

According to him, the nation can be saved only if it appraises and raises moral values while on the other hand weakening of the national spirit also weakens the morality: "There is only one real opportunity for salvation: To raise morality!" He considers virtues as qualities of faith while seeing disbelief as a

²⁴ *Fletët*, p. 288.

²⁵ *Fletët*, p. 682.

²⁶ To Yozgatlı İhsan Efendi.

²⁷ Erverdi (ed.), p. 78.

²⁸ *Fletët*, p. 285.

²⁹ *Fletët*, p. 462.

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sign of defeat, even for the most learned men: “*While virtuous people faith indicate, many knowledgeable from disbelief suffer defeat!*”³⁰ He advocates the blending of the trio science, morality and technology: “It takes science, technology and high moral”³¹ According to the expert of Akif’s work, M. Ertugrul Duzdag, the poet “had his beliefs raised on this social formula: Religion = patriotism + knowledge”³²

Ersoy appreciates much tradition and traditionalism too³³, rejects myth and mythology as “warped worldview”³⁴, linking the latter to superstitions and Pharaoh and pharaohian culture. He complains why intellectuals understand religion wrongly and try to eliminate it while the people, leaving the true religion throw themselves into superstitions.³⁵

He is against the atomisation of society, against the state of lack of connectivity and unity with other members of society. He says that *unity gives life and elevates, while division burns and kills (Ittihad Yaşatır Yükseltir, Yakar Tefrika Öldürür)*.³⁶ He prays to God to avoid the divisions that burden on the backs of the world Islamic community (*ummah*).

*Remove the obstacle to unity
O God, don't let the umma from this division suffer
For centuries going on, in desperation let it not!*³⁷

He criticizes the press of the time as sowers of division:

*Newspapers of all kinds of titles, numberless
The seed of division continuously sow.*³⁸

In his concept of modernity he excludes ideas for the overthrow of religion and morality, rather insisting on their spread. He laments why the Islamic society has remained alien to the science of yesterday, concerning himself much about the lack of science and technology as a cause of outrages and decline of the generation. He says:

³⁰ *Fletët*, p. 625.

³¹ *Fletët*, p. 526.

³² *Fletët*, foreword.

³³ Erverdi (ed.) p. 73.

³⁴ Shih: Milazim Krasniqi, *Letërsia dhe besimet fetare*, Logos-A, Skopje, 2010, p. 25.

³⁵ *Fletët*, foreword.

³⁶ *Fletët*, foreword.

³⁷ *Fletët*, p. 682.

³⁸ *Fletët*, p. 278.

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*Poor people the strength of understanding have lost
Nobody with science deals, with technology;
Down is the name of industry, of commerce as well;
There's agriculture only, on methods of Prophet Adam!*³⁹

He feels this situation with burning inside and shows the way out of such agony:

*To the science of the West turn your face,
And your duty do, by night and day
The old knowledge of three centuries to gain together.
Unnumbered fountains on the ground of technology,
Drink of them and their waters bring to the fatherland.*⁴⁰

In this context Ersoy takes as example Russia, especially Japan, which has not been alienated, having received the technology while has maintaining its self-identity (Ehe evil coming as a fashion, decays at customs!)

Akif is against nationalistic feelings, which he calls "perversity".⁴¹ He says: *"I could not, I can not understand how the feelings to separate and fall apart got into your brain. Was the devil who put the idea of nationality in your mind? The idea of nationality is the earthquake that will collapse from the foundations the Islam that holds together in one nationality so many nationalities distinct from each other."*⁴² *Is there splitting in Islam? The Prophet cursed the idea of nationalism*⁴³ and ethnic bigotry. In another place he says: *Neither party madness we need, nor the plague of nationalism!*⁴⁴ In this context it should be mentioned that the translator into Albanian used in a negative context the word nationality that is a positive term, a natural condition of social groups and we think it should be translated as nationalism. It should be emphasized that Akif, like all people, has gone through an evolution of ideas so it is interesting that in poems of 1912 he presents the idea of nation as a state of

³⁹ *Fletët*, p. 357.

⁴⁰ *Fletët*, p. 528.

⁴¹ Yusuf Hamzaoglu, *Balkan Türklüğü*, I, Logos-A, Skopje, 2010, p. 76.

⁴² *Fletët*, p. 279.

⁴³ *Fletët*, p. 302.

⁴⁴ *Fletët*, p. 367.

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social defect (Fromm)⁴⁵, while in the March of Independence⁴⁶ he speaks about the star of his nation, of his star, his nation's star only...

*For you, for my nation there'll be no decline!
My flag that freedom loves, in freedom has the right to live!
My nation that to God prostrates, in independence has the right to live!*

However it should be noted that in the national anthem, Akif again links nationalism with religion, with adhân, with prayer, with God, the temple, the martyr, speaking so about a kind of religious nationalism. Some say that he makes a distinction between racism (*kavmiyet*) which disintegrates state's tissue and nation (*milliyet*)⁴⁷ to which he ascribes positive features of society-building. He aims a community system in which its members behave and act according to feelings and thoughts in common, according to the "us" feeling (Tönnies). Besides with the plight of nation and the nation, he deals with the lethargy of the East, which was in a position inferior to the West (*working West- lazy East*, "East today is far. In morality as well as technology!", "Collapsed homes, ruined and finished states."). Always sympathizing with the sufferings of his father's land, he curses the crime committed against Muslims in the Balkans, its actors and perpetrators.⁴⁸

CONCLUSION

The *Safahat* of Mehmet Akif Ersoy is considered "the nightingale of Islam" and the symbol of Islamic thought of a period, is an interpreter of the past and the future and it will never lose its value because it has been written with spirit, is non-conformist and constructivist poetry. In this work, the author makes a sociology and anthropology of Islam, based on universal principles of humanity, knowledge and tolerance, aiming to create an harmony between society and divine teachings. He is a pioneer of organic social solidarity, of social equilibrium based on an Islamic *modus vivendi*.⁴⁹ He is ummatist, anti-cesarist and anti-despotist. He is against depersonalization and desocialization. Akif's poetic opus is a masterpiece that all those who do social engineering should keep it close, from politicians to members of the academic world,

⁴⁵ A state in which the greatest part of the members of a society have not achieved the aim of freedom and spontanousness, have not known their self and are in a state of collective alienation.

⁴⁶ Published in *Sebilurreshad*, vol. 18, n. 468, p. 305, 17 February 1921, Ankara.

⁴⁷ Okay & Düzdağ, *ibid*.

⁴⁸ Duman Halûk Harun, *Balkanlara Veda*, DUYAP Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2005, p. 114, 136. *Fletët*, p. 527, 667.

⁴⁹ Okay & Düzdağ, *ibid*.

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university teachers, scientists of various profiles, in particular literary men, sociologists and anthropologists, Islam experts and theologians. Reading this opus helps learning the history of a wider society and the way how social trends were perceived by an enlightened Albanian-Ottoman mind who offers a map and a social project upon which to build a functional society. It is misery people not to adopt a thinker as great as him, with anonymous names appearing in various books and websites of Albanian literature and no room for a giant as Akif, a major poet and social architect. We suggest scientific institutions to deal more with Akif's work and to try to popularize his discourse.

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