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**Arzu Tofig Dadashova**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7504-0467>

Lecturer, ANAS Institute of Oriental Studies named after acad. Z. M. Bunyadov, Department of Turkish Philology, Azerbaijan, d.arzu@bk.ru

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## Religion in Turkish Historical Novels

### Abstract

Religion, which occupies a significant place in human life since the beginning of civilization, over time has become an integral part of our lives. Therefore, researchers emphasize that the history of religion is as old as the history of humanity. The need for religion arose from the spiritual needs of people. Religion is one of the main elements among the moral values of a nation, and it has great power in ensuring unity and equality. Religion is one of the main forces that hold people living in a country together. The goal of religion and the state is the same. Both are there to create order, to educate moral and honest people. Both religion and the state derive their power from the nation, the people, and those who believe in it. As a source of motivation for society religion has a special role in the life of states and nations. Especially for Turkic communities it can be clearly observed from the examples of literature that religion and clergy played an important role in the creation of the state, guarding unity, equality and social justice. Present research deals with the role of religion in the creation of the state, the place of religion in society and the attitude towards clergy reflected in the historical novels written after the second half of the 20th century in the Turkish literature on the history of the establishment of the Ottoman state.

**Keywords:** Turkish, literature, historical novel, Ottoman, religion, state, image

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## Türk Tarihi Romanlarında Din

### Öz

*Medeniyetin başlangıcından bu yana insan hayatında önemli bir yer tutan din, zamanla hayatımızın ayrılmaz bir parçası haline gelmiştir. Bu nedenle araştırmacılar, din tarihinin insanlık tarihi kadar eski olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Dine duyulan ihtiyaç, insanların manevi ihtiyaçlarından doğmuştur. Din, bir milletin ahlaki değerleri arasındaki ana unsurlardan biridir ve birlik ve eşitliğin sağlanmasında büyük bir güce sahiptir. Din, bir ülkede yaşayan insanları bir arada tutan ana güçlerden biridir. Dinin ve devletin amacı aynıdır. Her ikisi de düzen yaratmak, ahlaklı ve dürüst insanlar yetiştirmek için vardır. Din de devlet de gücünü millettten, halktan ve ona inananlardan alır. Toplum için bir motivasyon kaynağı olarak din, devletlerin ve milletlerin hayatında özel bir role sahiptir. Özellikle Türk toplulukları için din ve din adamlarının devletin kuruluşunda, birliğin, eşitliğin ve sosyal adaletin korunmasında önemli bir rol oynadığı literatür örneklerinden açıkça görülebilir. Bu araştırma, Osmanlı Devleti'nin kuruluş tarihine ilişkin Türk edebiyatında 20. yüzyılın ikinci yarısından sonra yazılan tarihi romanlara yansıyan, devletin kuruluşunda dinin rolü, dinin toplumdaki yeri ve din adamlarına yönelik tutumu ele almaktadır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Türk, edebiyat, tarihi roman, Osmanlı, din, devlet, imaj

### Introduction

A historical novel is a work of fiction that takes its subject from history, reflects the historical events of a certain period, and the traditions of the nation. In the historical novel, historical events are explained through the philosophical values and literary form. The structure, events and characters of a historical novel can be subjective. A historical novel is a type of novel that reflects any era or event in a realistic but literary aesthetic form.

Historical novels have a great impact on the lives of nations. When writers feel that the national unity, independence, and national culture of peoples are in danger, they write historical novels in the name of protecting the motherland and the nation (Dural, 1991, p. 17). This shows how important historical novels are in the lives of nations and identifies the role of historical novels in the formation and awakening of national consciousness.

S. Tural, who thinks that historical novels were created when the feelings of nationalism, national state, and immortality were strengthened, and enemy invasions were felt, he tried to explain the role of historical novels in the formation of national identity as follows: “*Nations with national consciousness and proud history can build a future by making their dreams come true in the light of historical consciousness. A conscious writer can evaluate past and present events and create masterpieces with an exuberant spirit. Such works will preserve the integrity of the Turkish nation and pave the way for its rise*” (Sadık, 1991, p. 228).

The beginning and end of a historical novel is the stories of events, historical periods and people from past written in a literary form (Argunşah, 2016, p. 22). As can be seen from the definition, the selection of the events in the novel from a completed past is one of the most important conditions of the historical novel. The writer filters the data he obtained during the long research and re-enlivens history by adapting it to his imagination around reality and human stories. Historical novels created from the harmony of history and literature played an important role in the formation of national identity. Historical novels are among the works that have a special place in the promotion and glorification of national-spiritual values such as homeland, land, state, and religion. The role of religion in preserving the presence of nations on the stage of history is great. Religion is the main means of ensuring unity, brotherhood and love among people. Religion has a special role in the settlement of Anatolia by the ancient Turks from Central and Middle Asia and the Turkification of Anatolia and the establishment of the state here. This can be seen clearly when we look at the historical novels that talk about the history of the Seljuk and the Ottoman state. The goal of the present research is to study the questions such as the impact of religion on the creation of the state and the role of religion in society reflected in historical novels written after the second half of the 20th century about the history of the establishment of the Ottoman state.

The object of the research are such novels as Kemal Tahir's "Devlet Ana", Tarik Bugra's "Osmanjik", and Mustafa Necati Sepetchioghlu's "Kilit (Lock)", "Anakhtar (Keys)", "Kapi (Door)", "Konak (Mansion)", "Chatı (Roof)", published after the second half of the 20th century.

While the research, the scientific-theoretical provisions of modern philological thinking were taken as the basis, the experience and results of the relevant works in Türkiye Turcology, historical-comparative and systematic analysis methods were used.

### **1. The role of religion in the formation of the state by Turks**

In the early times, massive migration of Turks can be observed from Central Asia to Eastern Asia, Central Europe and the Balkans. The Turks, wandering from village to village in the Asian deserts looking for pastures for their animals, established different political associations in different historical periods. Before and after the adoption of Islam, the Turks who moved to the west and south organized themselves in various ways and established political and administrative systems. The biggest of them were the Hun, Gokturk, Seljuk and Ottoman states. For Turks the state system is formed on the combination of such symbols as a

homeland, nation and religion. The unifying influence of religion is clearly observed in the novels involved in the study.

Ancient Turks thought that the real owner of the state was God. After the Turkish nation accepted Islam, they lived with these traditions for more than a thousand years. After the acceptance of Islam by the Turks, religion acted as an important element in the formation of the state. Religion has played a unifying role in Turkish society since the time of the Beyliks until the Tanzimat Decree.

In M. N. Sepetchioglul's novel "Kilit (Lock)", the marches of the Turks to Anatolia and the Balkans were shown with the symbol of a lock. Although the mentor Sav Tekin tried to soften the lock found by Alpaslan by oiling it and hitting with a stone, still he could not unlock it. The rusty lock in the novel is a reference to Byzantium, which was an obstacle in front of the Seljuks, who were trying to make Anatolia, the historical lands of the Turks, a dwelling. Sarı Hodja tells them how to open the lock: "To open the lock, you greased it, softened it by hitting from right to left, but it did not open. Of course, where is its "Bismillah"? Sav Tek should trust his mind as much as he trusts his strength, and he should not forget "Bismillah", bravery is not enough here" (Sepetçioğlu, 2005, p. 16). When they say "Bismillah" and tried to open the lock, a commotion erupted. They were attacked by Shahmeli's men.

Later, Sarı Hodja gives the lock to Alpaslan and says that it will be opened not only by war, but by unity, reason and faith. Sarı Hodja explains that without "Bismillah" or faith, there will be no state unity among the Seljuks, and the struggle of the army will be fruitless. With this, he points out that without the help of sheikhs, it is impossible to manage a state and ensure unity among the nation.

In M.N. Sepetchioghlu's novel "Kilit (Lock)", Alpaslan believes that the bond that will strengthen the unity and bind the Seljuks together is Islam: "Our union should be our religion. I don't know Islamism, Rafizism, batiniyya. Whoever tries to divide Islam should be destroyed", he said (Sepetçioğlu, 2005, p. 249). Thus, Alpaslan made it clear that those who wanted to divide Seljuks using different religious sects as an excuse would be destroyed.

At the beginning of M. N. Sepetchioghlu's novel "Kapı (Door)", Kylich Arslan appears as someone who does not believe in God, but only trusts in his sword and heroism, and does not trust anyone around him. Denying the existence of "tekkes", which had a special role in the establishment of Turkish unity in Anatolia, he asked Arsagun Bey: "Are tekkes a human being himself?" "Hush! Do not say it elsewhere, they will laugh at you", he teases him. Arsagun Bey replied: "It's the tekke, my sultan. If there were no tekkas, if the Oghuzs from The East came

here only with swords, shields, arrows or wits, we would never be able to settle at this end of Urumeli. We would never be able to wake up the sleeping lands, we would also fall asleep” (Sepetçioğlu, 1973, p. 298). These words by Arsagun Bey emphasize that not only strength and bravery are sufficient for the creation of a state, but religion and faith were also important.

At the beginning of the novel, Kylich Arslan is depicted as a character that rebelled even against God in his conversations with Chaka Bey. His question “Which God?” scared Arsagun and Iltutmus Beys. “The faithless Seljuk sultan will be overthrown soon. Together with him he will drown the Oghuz clan too” (Sepetçioğlu, 1973, p. 150-151). They were worried that these godless thoughts of Kylich Arslan would not end well for the state, that it would be the state’s end. However, there was a reason for his lack of confidence and belief. The sudden death of his father Suleyman Bey deeply shook him. Kylich Arslan: “Süleyman Shah established a Turkic state among the infidels in Byzantium. He trusted Malik shah and his soldiers, so what happened? Those of his own blood line trampled my father to the horses”, he rebelled. The betrayal to his father by those around him angered Kylich Arslan and gave him umbrage to God and religion. But despite this, in the later pages of the novel, over time, Kylich Arslan is shown as an established with the help of Arsagun Bey true Muslim. “I understood you, Arsagun Bey. Everything is beautiful with God, it is beautiful to believe and love what you believe in, this is a motherland, this is Seljuks” (Sepetçioğlu, 1973, p. 43). We see the unifying role of religion also in M. N. Sepetchioghlu’s novel “Chati (Roof)” when Kumral Dede and Sheikh Adabali gather together Muslims and non-Muslims in the healing house (“bimarhane”) they established together.

## **2. Religious rituals and attributes in historical novels**

Religion also has a spiritual front that protects the state. In novels, before the battle for the success of the state during wars prayers are said, verses are read, and namaz is performed. It was considered crucial to say “Bismillah” when going on a trip.

In M.N. Sepetchioghlu’s novel “Kilit (Lock)”, Sarı Hodja teaches Alpaslan and Sav Tekin that the lock shown as a symbol of the state can be opened with “Bismillah” and faith: “Sav Tekin trusts in his bravery and intelligence, but he should not forget the Besmele” (Sepetçioğlu, 2005, p. 16). Turks believed that all difficulties can be overcome with “Bismillah”, because Bismillah is the key to unopened doors, the beginning and basis of everything. The Turk’s power, strength and intelligence are completed with “Bismillah”.

One of the interesting nuances in K. Tahir’s novel “Devlet Ana” is that when Mavro Liya’s murderer follows Notus Gladys and Uranhan in the swamp and wants to kill him, he

pulls out his cross and says “Bismillah”. The writer used the cross and “Bismillah” together when killing his enemies, despite the fact that Mavron, who was previously a Christian, converted to Islam.

In M. N. Sepetchioghlu’s novel “Anahtar (Key)”, Kupeli Hafiz writes in his will to his son Iltutmus Bey before the death: “*Bismillahir Rahmani Rahim. Islamize first, then turn into Seljuks. For this reason, you will not think of yourself, but of your people. You don't have a problem, do you? The people have a problem...*” (Sepetçioğlu, 1999, p. 43). It is not accidental that his speech starts with “Bismillah”. In the novel “Anakhtar” the writer once again shows the special role of religion in the creation of the state.

One of the main keys to religion is prayer. In historical novels, dervishes (clerics), who were distinguished by their ability to heal people, did not forget to recite prayers in addition to the ointments they prepared for the treatment of the sick. In the novel “Anahtar”, the writer makes Kupeli Hafiz regularly recite the Surah “Alif, Lam, Mim” and the prayer “Ayatal Kursi” while treating Sav Teki with special herbs. In the novel “Konak”, Kumral Dede says “Besmele” (Bismillah) every time he prepares an ointment with his own hands for Rahman, who was badly injured by the Mongols’ attack. When he applied the medicine to his wounds, he said: “May the hand not be ours, but the hand of our Prophet” (Sepetçioğlu, 2006, p. 66). Although dervishes treat the patient with medicines, they think that this is not enough and believe that prayer also has healing power. As faith is a great power.

In historical novels, it is possible to encounter scenes with “Quran-e-Karim”. In the novel “Osmanjik” by T.Bughra, when Osmanjik came to Adebali’s tekke to ask the permission to marry Malhun Khatun, he sees the “Quran-e-Karim” in his room and does not sleep until morning as a sign of respect. Such nuances have legend characteristics related to Islamic traditions. Moreover, in M.N. Sepetchioghlu’s novel “Konak” the fact that Ertogrul Bey on his deathbed asked to read the “Quran-e-Karim” to him shows how strong the religious beliefs of Turks were.

Azan is one of other main elements of Islam. Azan is an invitation that calls Muslims to prayer, and at the same time, it relaxes the hearts of believers, gives them peace and divine enthusiasm, and when it is recited, it makes the unbelievers doubt and scares them. The voice from the minarets and the conquered fortresses inspires the warriors and relieves them of fear. In the Ottoman Empire, the first thing done after the conquests was the reading of the call to prayer - azan. The call to prayer is often found in historical novels. In M.N.Sepetchioghlu’s novel “Chati (Roof)”, after the conquest of Karajahisar, the Turks turned the church into a

mosque, with Dursun Fagih reading the call to prayer azan from the dome of a church. After that, Osman Bey held a council to discuss the problems of the beylik in this mosque. Thus, in the following years, it became customary to build mosques in the places conquered by the Ottomans (Sepetçioğlu, 1974, p. 5).

In T. Bughra's novel "Osmanjik", Evdokia, who shot a good arrow and was able to fight during the siege of the Aydos fortress, created many obstacles for the Ottomans. On the third day of the siege, the girl saw Rahman, admired him and wrote him a letter the next morning: "My name is Eudoxia, I am the niece of Nikephoros. You are the man who recites the call to prayer in my dream. You cannot take this castle by assault. In two days, come with 8-10 people and I will hand over the fortress to you". What prompted Eudoxia to take this step was a dream she saw. The girl who falls into a deep well in her dream is rescued by Rahman who recites the call to prayer and his prophet. Thus, the admiration for the call to prayer azan and the being fond of Rahman resulted in the conquest of the Aydos fortress by the Turks.

Namaz (salah), which is one of the main terms of Islam, is obligatory for Muslims. Prophet says that prayer is one of the five obligatory terms for a Muslim, the most virtuous of deeds is prayer performed on time and in Doomsday a person would be questioned primarily about namaz (Koçakoğlu and Çalık, 2017, p. 8). Sari Hodja, one of the characters of the novel "Kilit (Lock)", never delayed his prayer regardless of where he was, even when he was on a horse or when he was captured by the Rafizi.

As in the whole Islamic world, Friday is also a holy day for Turks. In the novel "Kapı (Door)" the preparations before the Friday prayer were described as follows: "After the drums, the trumpets fell silent. It was Friday, August 26. It was time for sala (sala is recited before Friday prayer). To the north, south, west, east from Malazgirt Karakurt Hafiz climbed on the stone and recited the call to prayer" (Sepetçioğlu, 1973, p. 159).

On Friday, August 26, while giving a sermon to the people, Karakurt Hafiz talked about the victory of the Turkic army in Malazgird after the Friday prayer, and emphasized the impact of religion on people: "*Bismillah Rahman Rahim, God is merciful and forgiving... today is Friday, and on Friday that day, such a prayer was performed that there has never been such a Friday prayer ever before. He was an Armageddon...*" (Sepetçioğlu, 1973, p. 164). By talking about the great Malazgird victory, Hafiz not only instilled faith, struggle, and determination to fight in people, but also increased their trust in the state.

In the Islamic world, martyrdom is considered as one of the most glorious fates. Historically, the Turks have been a nation that in the battle prayed to God for martyrdom for

the sake of the homeland and the state. The Turks, who value martyrdom as the highest positions, think that as martyrs are the most beloved servants of God, God takes them to his realm in young age. These ideas are an indicator of faith and love for religion and the creator. In the novel “Devlet Ana (Mother State)” by K. Tahir, the body of Shirin Gyz, who was martyred during the conquest of Bilejik Fortress, is buried without washing and prayers as she was a martyr (Tahir, 2004, p. 546). In T. Bughra’s novel “Osmanjik” Ayna Melek, a Turkish woman who lost firstly her son Bay Koca and then her husband Savci Bey, never rebelled against God, accepted her fate humbly and embraced all hardships of the life with great fortitude.

In M. N. Sepetchioghlu’s novel “Konak (Mansion)”, Kumral Dede bequeaths to Osman Bey that the belt he brought from Yesi be buried with him. Saying that this is not possible according to the laws of Islam, Dursun Fagih surprises Osman Bey with his answer. Osman Bey says: “It is Dede’s will. You know you need to fulfill his will”. Dursun Fagih: *“Even if it was not a will, your single word was enough. But this case is different. Anything except for a shroud is forbidden. Last word, Dursun Fagih, last word. Anything other than a shroud is haram for the dead. What if I say it is to be put? If your order is for the living, let it be so. But if your order is for the dead, don’t interfere. You are not responsible for the dead”* (Sepetçioğlu, 2006, p. 365). As we have seen, even if Osman Bey is a good man, even if his words are considered law, his power is not enough for religious cases. Burial of a Muslim should be carried out according to religious laws and it doesn’t matter whether this is a bey, a khan or a Padishah.

Osman Bey was very surprised by what was said in the letter that came out of Kumral Dede’s belt after his burial: *“It was worldly property, it remained in the world, a son will not give worldly property!”* (Sepetçioğlu, 2006, p.365). In the letter, it is mentioned that the world is frail, that noone even Kumral Dede can take anything with him even the old belt, though he wants it.

In the novel “Devlet Ana (Mother State)” we see a different approach to religion and clergy. The Christian characters there who accepted Islam continued to use the previous patterns of religious behavior. So Mavro, who is now a Muslim, follows both Christian and Muslim beliefs. In the novel, we see characters who converted to Islam drinking alcohol. During the funeral of Shirin Gyz, who was martyred during the conquest of Bilejik Hisar, Kerimjan drank wine with Mavro (Tahir, 2004, p. 546).



The friendship between Muslims and Christians in the novel “Devlet Ana (Mother State)” is not welcomed by Bajibey. The fact that Orkhan Bey called the priest of Donmezkoyn “father” and Osman Bey calls the tekfur of Bilejik “my brother” angers Bajibey: “The bey should control what comes out of his mouth”, he reprimands them (Tahir, 2004, p. 96).

In the novel “Devlet Ana (Mother State)”, Bajibey’s prejudice towards Christians is also reflected in his attitude towards Liya. Bajibey’s words: “*To my house... an infidel girl will come as a bride... Am I dead?*” (Tahir, 2004, p. 108) show that he will not accept Liya as a bride because she is a Christian.

In historical novels such words as “May God have mercy”, “God help us”, “May he go to heaven”, “May God give strength to our arms”, “Thank God”, “May God spare his mercy”, “May God give us life”, “May God be pleased”, “Alhamdulillah”, “Mubarak” etc. are widely used.

### **3. Conversion in historical novels**

The conversion from one religion to another which is often encountered in historical novels can be observed also in T. Bughra’s “Osmanjik” and K. Tahir’s “Devlet Ana (Mother State)”. In “Osmanjik” Mikhail Kossess, whom Osman saved from the attack of bandits and later made his friend, converted to Islam and took the name Abdullah. As a result of his respect for Osman, the reader sees him as a person who helps Osman Bey and Kayi. The fact that he became a Muslim after a long hesitation and joined Osman Ghazi Khan’s army identifies both cultural and religious change.

Moreover, we see the conversion in the person of Nilufar Khatun, the wife of Osman Bey’s son Orkhan Gazi, and Eudoxia, who helped the Turks in capturing Aydos Castle. It was love that brought them both to Islam. Tekfur’s daughter, Holofira, fell in love with Orkhan Bey and changed her religion, taking the name of Nilufar Khatun. Eudoxia, on the other hand, saw Rahman in her dream reading the call to prayer, fell in love with him, took the name Saniye and accepted Islam. Thus, Eudoxia and Holofira, one of the Byzantine women in the novel, changed their religion of their own accord, accepted Islam for the sake of their love and started living with Turkish traditions. All three events are also considered as cultural metamorphose.

In the novel “Devlet Ana (Mother State)”, Mavro, who was tried to be blamed for Liya’s death, was being tortured by Filiatos, the brother of Karajahisar tekfur, and was rescued by Bajibey from Filiatos. After that, even though he accepted Islam, his name remains Mavro. In this regard K. Tahir tried to create an Ottoman nation. Thus, in the novel “Devlet Ana (Mother State)” along with Mavro, Armenian Toros also fights alongside Osman Gazi.

## Conclusion

The present research deals with the comparison of respective parts on the religion from the novels by three authors written in the same historical period. Based on the researched works, we can say that the role of religion in the establishment of the state, unity and equality, and justice is great in the historical novels on the history of the Seljuk and Ottoman states. It is possible to see the image of a dervish as the main representative of religion in the historical novels involved in the research. Dervishes (clerics), who are depicted in the novels as people who ensure Turkic unity in Anatolia, embody Islam and Turkishness, know and analyze political hadiths well, find their way to people's hearts with love, have the ability to heal them and fight bravely when the need arises. Dervishes, whom we encountered as religious people in the early times, were described as heroes who played a special role in the creation of the state, nation, unity and equality.

As it is seen, since the period of the beyliks religion and clerics acted as an important factor in the formation of the state in Seljuk and Ottoman times. Until the Tanzimat era, religion was known as a unifying element, a mean of ensuring unity and equality, but the place of religion and the clergy in society weakened during the modernization era that began with the Tanzimat reforms. During the period of westernization, which began with Mahmud II, religion took passive position in the administration and executive power of the state and was pushed aside. Especially during the years of the National Struggle, the negative attitude toward religion increased due to the conditions of the time.

In many western societies, including Rome and Byzantium, people were persecuted and tortured for their religious beliefs. Turks, on the other hand, have been a nation that always respected the ideas and religious beliefs of non-Turkic nations, what indicates the fact that the history of democracy in Turkic traditions is rooted back in ancient times. Until the last days of the Ottoman Empire, non-Turkic nations lived with the same rights as Turks. This should be taken as an indicator of both social justice and religious tolerance.

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