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The Ottoman Canon and the Construction of Turkish and Arabic Literatures

Ceyhun Arslan, Edinburgh University Press, 2025. 248 pp.: ISBN 9781399525831

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Ceyhun Arslan's monograph, "The Ottoman Canon and the Construction of Turkish and Arabic Literatures" (Edinburgh University Press, 2025) is a comparative overview of how Ottoman Turkish and Arabic texts contribute to the body of work that can be described as the "Ottoman canon" or the "Ottoman literary reservoir." The book explores the *Tanzimat* in the Ottoman context, and the *nahda* in the Arab context, as periods of transformation that paved the way for a consolidation of national identities and selves, or "subjects."

In terms of methodology, in line with a comparative literary analysis approach, Arslan utilizes the practice of close textual reading. In an attempt to move beyond more historically minded periodizations that place Arabic literature and Turkish literature on a specific timeline, Arslan analyzes these texts through their common themes and "afterlives," independent from geographical location, literary movements, or historical time period, and in conversation with each other. Arslan emphasizes the unique nature of empire as a geographical space in which travel and textual circulation are crucial factors in developing the idea of national subjects and their respective "literatures," thereby creating fluid connections that reach across geographical, ethnic, linguistic or cultural boundaries.

Utilizing the water imagery metaphors that Arslan has adopted, we can claim that his study analyzes Arabic and Turkish literary modernities as rivers flowing parallel to each other, each as tributaries of the "Ottoman ocean" or "literary reservoir." In the field of Ottoman Studies, such a comparative approach that draws on both Turkish and Arabic primary sources has mostly been lacking, and Arslan's work aims to partially fill this gap. In showing how the Turkish and Arabic texts engaged with each other, and with the larger Ottoman canon, Arslan exposes the literary and cultural domains that do not necessarily align with political power hierarchies.

The Ottoman Canon is comprised of six chapters. In Chapter One, "A Multilingual Ottoman Ocean: Taverns, Exclusions and Ziya Pasha's *Harabat,*" Arslan analyzes Ziya Paşa's (1829–80) anthology of Arabic, Persian and Turkish poetry, *Harabat* (The Tavern), both through close textual

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reading and pointing to the choices Ziya Paşa made in which texts to include in this collection. Arslan challenges the perception of earlier scholarship that viewed *Harabat* as a project to revive the "old literature." After providing an overview of the Young Ottomans movement and its intellectual origins, Arslan then proceeds to define the concept of "deracination," the process that, through severing texts from their original sources and contexts, helps create the Ottoman literary reservoir. Arslan exposes the process through which *Harabat* picks works from the Arabic, Persian and Turkish poetic traditions to create a reservoir "to affirm a multilingual Ottoman heritage, viewing the Persian and Arabic traditions as integral components of a grand imperial cultural identity" (Arslan 2025, 35). The chapter also reveals the internal contradictions of *Harabat*, where Ziya Pasha claimed that Arabic, Persian and Turkish intermingled flawlessly, yet at the same time proposed a linear progression where Arab poets, leading the way for subsequent streams, also preceded and influenced them.

The second chapter, "Jurjī Zaydān, Literary Comparisons and the Formation of Arabic and Turkish Literatures", focuses on Jurji Zaydan (1861–1914), one of the leading intellectual figures of the Arab *nahda* (cultural and intellectual renaissance/reawakening). Arslan delineates Zaydan's version of "Cultural Arab nationalism," and utilizes Zaydan's articles in *al-Hilal* on the Turkish intellectual Namik Kemal (1840–88) and the "History of Turkish Language Arts" to show the reader how these late nineteenth century intellectuals were in conversation with each other within the context of the Ottoman canon. This chapter, on the other hand, posits Zaydan and Kemal as figures who depict Turkish and Arab literatures as mirror images of each other, which have similarities but no intersections within the Ottoman reservoir. Through a close reading of Zaydan's articles, the author is able to show how Zaydan's brand of Arab nationalism did not necessarily advocate for secession from the Ottoman Empire and, furthermore, emphasized the role of the Turkish language as a marker of a specific Turkish identity. Therefore, this chapter exposes how the two literary revival movements, the Turkish *Tanzimat* and the Arab *nahda,* running side by side, were aware of each other, yet tended to overlook "the new 'Ottoman afterlife' that Arabic texts attained in the Ottoman 'tavern' or 'ocean' that Ziya Pasha's *Harabat* upholds" (65). As Arslan shows the reader, a revived interest in the concept of "classics" was prevalent in the thought processes of both authors, as both sought to establish an affinity with the literatures produced by European as well as Arab and Persian authors.

In chapter three, "The Ottoman Tarboosh: Disguise and the Novel Genre in Ahmet Midhat's *Hasan Mellah* and Muḥammad al-Muwayliḥī's *What ʿĪsā ibn Hishām Told Us,*" Arslan uses the two primary sources, *Hasan Mellah* and *Hadith Isa ibn Hisham*, to explore the concept of disguise. This chapter also explores the symbolic importance of the *tarboosh*, or *fez*, as a piece of headgear that acted as both as a marker of modernization an equalizer between the different socioeconomic and ethnic groups in Ottoman society. His main claim in this chapter is how these texts from the late Ottoman period "camouflaged" the process in which both Arabic and Turkish literatures emerged as national literatures. While exploring instances of disguise both in Ottoman history and works of Turkish and Arabic literature, Arslan also shows us how the novel was depicted as "a transhistorical form rather than an effect of deterritorialising socioeconomic forces that also

contributed to the solidification of communal boundaries" (86). Arslan closes the chapter by deducing that these texts in the late Ottoman period, circulating in different forms such as the *maqama* and the *riwaya*, were "in disguise" and some late Ottoman authors described these texts as "novels," thereby countering the effects of global capitalism such as displacement and deterritorialization. This process was similar to the different factions of the Ottoman society "disguising themselves" by wearing the *tarboosh*.

Chapter Four, "Ka'b ibn Zuhayr Weeps for Sultan Murad IV: Baghdad, Translation and the Turkish Language in Ma'ruf al-Rusafi's works" analyzes al-Rusafi's, Namik Kemal's and Süleyman Nazif's works to expose the cultural undercurrents of the late Ottoman Empire. Arslan claims that although he included samples of Turkish literature in his writing, al-Rusafi was nonetheless able to draw a line between the Arabic and Turkish languages. Arslan also explores the choices that Al-Rusafi made when he translated Namik Kemal's *Rüya* from Turkish into Arabic. Drawing similarities between Zaydan and al-Rusafi as non-secessionists, he claims that al-Rusafi's work was also engaged in conversation with the Ottoman Turkish milieu, and invested in the well being of the empire, through the usage of Arabic as a tool of modernization. In contrast to Ziya Paşa's vision of the Ottoman canon as an "ocean," al-Rusafi aimed at purging Arabic language expressions of Turkish influence, and vice versa (124). Al-Rusafi's goal was to detangle the two languages from each other, in order to purify them. This process eventually led to "the Ottoman reservoir's dissolution" (126). This chapter also ventures into works on the Ottoman loss of the Iraqi provinces such as al-Rusafi's *Nuwah Dijla* and Süleyman Nazif's *Firaq-i Iraq*. These works, appearing concomitantly with the decline of the Ottoman Empire, viewed Arabic and Persian literatures as the predecessors and sources of influence for Ottoman literature, thereby providing a contrast to Ziya Paşa's all encompassing vision of the Ottoman reservoir presented in Chapter One.

Chapter Five, "'From Ottoman Literature is Arabic Literature' to 'Arabs Possess a Literature: Hacı İbrahim, Ahmet Rasim and the Fetters of Influence'" points to the common elements of two different movements in late Ottoman literature: The camps of the "old literature" and the "new literature." Arslan explores how Hacı Ibrahim incorporates Arabic poems and pre-Islamic odes such as those of Imru'l Qays into the canon of the Ottoman literature. Through a close reading of Turkish translations of excerpts from Arabic poems, Arslan shows how these texts were "deracinated" from their original contexts and attained a "new life" within the Ottoman reservoir. In addition, Arslan underlines the fact that late Ottoman authors were mostly interested in Classical Arabic Literature, completely excluding texts in Arabic that emerged in the late Ottoman Empire, such as those composed by Zaydan. The chapter also explores how, in their depiction of Arab civilization as being superior to Turkish civilization, the essays and translations reflected the dynamic of an Orientalist discourse, in line with the views of Gustave Le Bon.

The final chapter, Chapter Six, "Family Matters: Oedipus, Tawfiq al-Hakim and Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar", looks at the works of Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1901–62) and Tawfiq al-Hakim (1898–1987) through the lens of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* and analyzes them comparatively through common themes relating to paternal relationships. Through a close reading of the major

themes of *The Return of the Spirit* by al-Hakim and *The Time Regulation Institute* by Tanpınar, the author shows how history and the past create anxiety for the main characters in their search for identity and meaning. Even though both Turkish and Egyptian societies grappled with questions of modernity and Westernization, Arslan claims that these novels "feature ethnically heterogeneous families who carry traces of the Ottoman past, hence undermining strictly nationalist visions" (172). In their search for emancipation from their families and past, and wish to create a new authentic culture, the protagonists of these novels are, however, unable to shake off the legacies of their parental/father figures and existing social hierarchies. As a result, these characters feel imprisoned.

The strength of Arslan's monograph lies in the way he utilizes late nineteenth and early twentieth century Ottoman historical and literary sources to present a critique of nationalist and rigid literary frameworks that treat Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Armenian, and Greek literatures as separate, fixed traditions tied to specific ethnic or religious communities. Instead, he argues, the late Ottoman literary world functioned as an interconnected, multilingual network in which texts circulated, were translated, and were reinterpreted across communities. At the same time, this cosmopolitanism coexisted with processes of canon formation, exclusion, and hierarchy.

It might be beneficial to add that in his analysis of texts across different languages and primary sources to expose how the concept of the Ottoman canon emerged, Arslan could have clarified and teased out the internal inconsistencies and contradictions of works like Ziya Paşa's *Harabat* more extensively, as this work pronounces the Ottoman poetic heritage to be both stable and immutable and also dead at the same time (50). Similarly, the reader might have wished to see the author address the internal inconsistencies of the work of Hacı Ibrahim who advocated modern ideas yet "contradicted his description of the Ottoman language as a 'lemonade' that mixed Arabic, Turkish and Persian" (149). The chapters as a whole do not necessarily represent a linear progression of the "Ottoman canon/reservoir" with clearly defined historical moments of emergence, development, and decline.

Overall, Arslan's monograph challenges the assumption that modern Arabic and Turkish literatures represent a clean break from classical traditions, or that the late Ottoman period was simply an era of Westernization. Classical Arabic and Persian texts continued to shape Ottoman literary modernity, often being reimagined as part of an "Ottoman" heritage. Literature itself emerges not as a fixed Western invention but as something constituted through translation and reinterpretation.

Ultimately, the author calls for rewriting literary history by moving beyond nationalist and disciplinary divisions (such as classical vs. modern or Arabic vs. Turkish) and by recognizing the multilingual, imperial, and translational character of the Ottoman canon. Such a comprehensive view of the Ottoman reservoir undoubtedly creates productive discussions and inspiration for further studies exploring the hitherto less commonly studied minority languages/literatures of the Ottoman canon through comparative lenses.

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Statement on the Use of AI and AI-Assisted Tools

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