

An overview of Mehmet Akif Ersoy's ideal generation in Âsım

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Introduction

The Renaissance and the Reformation in Europe led to Europeans scientifically and technologically superior over the Ottoman Empire where no reforms had already been introduced in order to avert the European challenge. Moreover, the French revolution in Europe which had nationalism and republicanism alongside with itself, caused the instigation of ethnicities of the Ottoman Empire, especially non-Muslims, and made the Ottomans to face a series of domestic and international problems. Although the Ottomans also made some attempt to reform their empire in order to solve their problems, it was not enough. Nevertheless, four different leading ideas, which left its impact on literature as well, for saving the Empire were proposed among the intellectuals of the Ottomans: Ottomanism, Islamism, Turkism, and Westernism.¹

Ottomanism emphasized the unification of various elements within the Empire regardless their ethnicity and religious identity were supposed to have the equal right.² However, the Russian–Ottoman war of 1877–1878, as well as the slaughtering of Muslims in the Balkans, and the instigation of Rums and Armenians caused the idea to be rejected and substituted by Islamism.³

The second leading idea was Islamism, which was supposed to unite all Muslims in the pivot of Islam and create a mighty Empire. The idea was developed in magazines such as *Sırat-ı Müstakim* (“The straight path”) and *Sebilürreşat* (“The way of guidance”).⁴ Moreover, Mehmet Akif Ersoy is considered as one of the leading scholars in the Islamism ideology. He had his particular thought and idea regarding identity. In this regard, he expressed his idea, an ideal generation that entitled as *Âsım'ın Nesli* (Âsım's Generation) in the sixth volume of *Safâhat*.

The third leading ideology was Turkism. In this thought, being a Turk was elevated, and it was replaced by gradually weakening of Ottomanism and Islamism. Ziya Gökalp (1876–1924) has been considered as a prominent leading person of this idea.⁵

The fourth ideology was Westernism, introduced in *Servet-i Fünun* (“Wealth of Knowledge”), and it was promoted as a possible cure saving and recovering the Ottoman Empire⁶ under the leadership of Abdullah Cevdet (1869–1932) and Tevfik Fikret (1870–1915).⁷

¹ Ünlü and Özcan, *Yirminci yüzyıl Türk edebiyatı*, 13.

² Hazratî, *Ottoman Constitutionalism* [مشروطه عثمان], 241.

³ Ibid. 249.

⁴ Kalm, *The Biographical Encyclopedia of Islamic Philosophy*, 13.

⁵ Meydanı, “Ziya Gökalp ve Türkçülük”.

In this article, firstly a short review of Mehmet Akif Ersoy's biography is presented. Secondly, *Âsim* which is considered as the main source of Mehmet Akif's idea in Turkish literature of the late Ottoman Empire is discussed in terms of characteristics of *Âsim*.

Finding and discussion

Mehmet Akif Ersoy was born on 20th December, 1873, in Istanbul's Sarıgözel district. However, because of his Albanian descent⁸ father's *imâmlık* (Duties of imam) in the Çanakkale's Bayramiç, his identity card was registered from the city.⁹ His father, Taher Efendi, was from Albania, and his mother, Emine Şerife, was from a family that moved to Tokat from Bukhara.¹⁰ Mehmet Akif learned Arabic from his father and took Farsi lessons in *Fatih Rüşdiyesi* ("Fatih middle school") and graduated as the first student of his class at school.¹¹ He continued his higher education at the *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* ("School of Political Science") in Istanbul and then at the *Mülkiye Baytar Mektebi* ("Civilian Veterinary School").¹² Mehmet Akif Ersoy became interested in poetry in his last two years of his education.¹³ Then, he mastered the French language and memorized Qur'an in six months.¹⁴ His first poem, titled *Dastûr* ("Order"), was composed on 3rd November 1892, however, his poem, *Kur'an'a Hitap* ("Address to the Qur'an"), was firstly published in *Mektep* magazine in 14 March 1895.¹⁵ After he was graduated from *Baytar Mektebi* in 1893, he was hired in *Umûr-ı Baytariye ve Islâh-ı Hayvanât Umum Müfettiş Muavinliği* ("The General Inspectorate of Animal Reform and Veterinary Affairs") and had worked there for twenty years.¹⁶ In 1914 he was hired at the *Teşkilât-ı Mahsusa* ("The Special Organization") and because of the job, he had the opportunity to travel to several places, such as Europe and the Hejaz among others, in the coming four years, and therefore he got acquainted with the people of the area, and also with non-Ottoman Muslims.¹⁷ During World War I (1914–1918) and the Turkish War of Independence (1919–1923), he was the representative of Burdur (city in the southwestern part of present-day Turkey) in the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, and wrote *İstiklâl mârsı* ("Independence March"). Nevertheless, after the Turkish War of Independence and the foundation of modern Turkey based on secular values, which were not in compliance with his ideal country¹⁸, he left Turkey and moved to Cairo, where he taught Turkish language and literature at the Cairo University.¹⁹ Until the end of his life, despite

⁶ Stewart-Robinson, *Intersections in Turkish Literature*, 130.

⁷ Dudoignon et al., *Intellectuals in the modern Islamic world*, 75.

⁸ Karpat, *The politicization of Islam*, 36.

⁹ Düzdağ and Okay, "Mehmed Âkif Ersoy".

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Dudoignon et al., *Intellectuals in the modern Islamic world*, 78.

¹³ Ersoy, *Safahat (Seğmeler)*, 15.

¹⁴ Öcal, *Tamkların dilinden cumhuriyet dönemi din eğitimi ve dini hayat*, 1:210.

¹⁵ Sarı, *Mehmet Akif Şiirleri*, 11.

¹⁶ Tuğlacı, *Mehterhane'den bando'ya*, 232.

¹⁷ Günel, "Mehmet Akif'in pek bilinmeyen devlet görevleri." 207–209.

¹⁸ Karakılıç, *Sürgün, İntihal ve İntihar*, 49.

¹⁹ Turfan and Roberta, "Ersoy, Mehmed Âkif".

overtly taking side with the Caliphate, he did not attempt to denigrate Turkey's new secular government system.²⁰ Mehmet Akif Ersoy returned to Turkey at the end of his life, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938) had already consolidated the country on its secular ideology. However, Atatürk was not concerned about his homecoming.²¹ Finally, he died in Istanbul in 1936 and was buried shortly thereafter in the Edirnekapı Martyr's Cemetery.²²

Mehmet Akif Ersoy's main work is *Safâhat* which is considered as one of the most famous and popular Ottoman literary heritage. The work includes seven books as follows: *Safâhat* ("Phases", 1911), *Süleymaniye Kürsüsünde* ("At the Süleymaniye's Pulpit," 1912), *Hakkın Sesleri* ("Voices of the Truth," 1913), *Fatih Kürsüsünde* ("At the Fatih's Pulpit," 1914), *Hatıralar* ("Memoirs", 1917), *Âsım* (1924), *Gölgeler* ("Shadows", 1933).

The sixth volume of *Safâhat*, *Âsım*, consists of 2293 verses in which 1206 of them had been published periodically between 1919 and 1924 in *Sebilürreşad*, and 1206 verses were later added when it was published as a book.²³ The work is written based on the narrative and dialogue about Ottoman social issues between four people through the lens of Âsım's life. Written in the language of the late Ottoman Empire, four main characters discuss the social problems of the time: Hocazâde (The poet), Köse İmâm (Ali Şevki Hoca, a student of the poet's father), Âsım (Köse İmâm's son) and Emin (The poet's son) about in the Ottoman language in the late Ottoman Empire.

In his book, Mehmet Akif Ersoy narrates the story of Âsım's life, focusing on presenting an ideal generation for the people of the Ottoman Empire that can save the empire. Moreover, he entitles the name of Âsım for the story in order to associate with Âsım ibn Thabit, one of the *Ansar* ("The Helpers")²⁴ who participated in the Battle of Badr (A.D. 624) and who was endowed with a brave, determined and stand-up characteristics.²⁵ Bearing this in mind, Mehmet Akif was going to give an answer to the question "how would the Ottoman be saved?", which was posed by intellectuals at that time. He believed that the ultimate solution was the Islamist ideology, inspired by the Qur'an, reflected in Âsım's personalities trying to upbringing the same generation. To do so, he criticized, with the following words, the Ottoman Empire's *medreses* (educational institution) for not upbringing the generation in this way, as that there was no such scholars similar to the classical Muslim scholars:

*"Do you have a Medrese? It has already been destroyed!
Come on! Show me where Ibn Rushd²⁶ is?
Ibn Sina²⁷? Ghazali?
Where are a few 'Âlîms [scholars] like Sayyid Razi?"²⁸*

²⁰ Karakılıç, *Sürgün, İntihal ve İntihar*, 47.

²¹ Ibid. 50.

²² Turfan and Roberta, "Ersoy, Mehmed Âkif".

²³ Düzdağ, *Mehmet Akif Ersoy*, 129.

²⁴ Oflaz, *Mehmet Akif'in Âsım'ın Nesli Projesine*, 32.

²⁵ Yalçın, *Yerli ve milli bir gençlik*, 452.

²⁶ Also often Latinized as Averroes (1126–1198), Andalusian polymath.

²⁷ Also known as Avicenna (980–1037), who is often regarded as one the most significant Persian scholar of the Islamic Golden Age.

*“By Taking inspiration directly from the Qur’an
we should make the intellect of the age pronounce Islam
It is impossible through struggling in vain, it needs science!
I cannot see so much powerful, you show me!”²⁹*

For the generation inspired by the Qur’an, the *Vatan (Homeland)* was a non-negotiable priority. Furthermore, patriotism is an indispensable part of it as Ersoy considered it more important than life and properties in *İstiklal Marşı*, which the present-day Turkish national anthem, as follows:

*“May God take my life, my loved ones,
and all possessions from me if He will,
But let Him not deprive me of my one true homeland in the world.”³⁰*

In this regard, Akif’s *Âsım* takes part in the Battle of Çanakkale (The Gallipoli campaign, 1915–1916) and fights bravely for defending his homeland. Mehmet Akif compares this war with Badr in which fathers and their children and grandsons participated in the war.³¹ Mehmet Akif attributes the homeland’s salvation to *Âsım*’s Generation with the following verses:

*“The fortified buildings can be surrounded and can be destroyed
The creation of human cannot stop the Human determination
These chests as eternal borders of God.”*

*“It is my innovation creation. Do not let it be trampled.” He said
To me the generation of *Âsım* is the true generation:
Look, it did not allow its honor to be broken, it will not break.”³²*

It should be emphasized that the nation is an important term in Mehmet Akif’s work and it refers to the *Ummah* of Islam, notably to the Ottoman Muslims, rather than other Muslim communities, such as the Iranian Muslims. However, interestingly enough, despite being a Sunni Muslim, he showed interest towards other Muslims like the Iranian Shias as well.³³

²⁸ “Medresen var mı senin? Bence o çoktan yürüdü. / Hadi göster bakayım şimdi de İbnü’r-Rüşd’ü / İbn-i Sinâ niye yok? Nerde Gazâlî görelim? /Hani Seyyid gibi, Râzî gibi üç beş âlim?” Ersoy, *Safahat Asım*, 86.

²⁹ “Doğrudan doğruya Kur’ân’dan alıp ilhâmı, / Asrın idrâkine söyletmeliyiz İslâm’ı. / Kuru da’vâ ile olmaz bu, fakat ilm ister;/ Ben o kudrette adam görmüyorum, sen göster?” Ibid. 87.

³⁰ “Canı, cananı, bütün varımı alsın da hüda, / Etmesin tek vatanımdan beni dünyada cüda,” “İstiklal Marşı,”

https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=%C4%B0stiklal_Mar%C5%9F%C4%B1&oldid=951275611. Accessed: 16 April 2020.

³¹ Öteki Gündem, “Mehmet Akif Ersoy”.

³² “Sarılır, indirilir mevkî-i müstahkemler, / Beşerin azmini tevkîf edemez sun’-ı beşer; / Bu göğüslerse Hudâ’nın ebedî serhaddi; / “O benim sun’-i bedî’im, onu çiğnetme!” dedi. / *Âsım*’ın nesli... Diyordum ya... Nesilmiş gerçek: / İşte çiğnetmedi nâmûsunu, çiğnetmeyecek.” Ersoy, *Safahat Asım*, 100.

³³ Kuntay, *Mehmed Akif*, 88–89.

In fact, Mehmet Akif's approached Islam and the Islamic world as it is a nation, and the word *Kavmiyat* was described as equivalent in meaning to ethnicity. Hence, he considered *Kavmiyat* as the archenemy of *Milliyet* (nationality).³⁴ In this regard, he believed that the religious identity of a Muslim is superior to its ethnicity. He considered ethnic identity secondary comparing to religion.³⁵ In general, according to Akif, a nation was embodied in the form of a religion which was prevalent at that time and which was opposed to race and ethnicity. In this respect, when the Albanians declared to be an independent state in 1912, despite his Albanian origins, he composed as follows:

*"Your nationality was Islam, wasn't it? [...] What is ethnicity?
If you hugged and stood tight your nationhood
What does it mean to be Albanian? Does it have a place in the sharia?
It is nothing, just an impiety to insist on ethnicity.
Is an Arab superior to a Turk; a Laz to Circassian or a Kurd; Persian
to a Chinese?
Is there "ethnic elements" in Islam? What is it got to do with it!
Prophet curses the idea of ethnicity.
It is the biggest enemy of the spirit of the prophet
To be forgotten the name of the person who put it in Islam."*³⁶

Going back to the story where Âsım goes to the battle of Çannakkale for saving his *vatan*, he fights with praise of Saladin (1137–1193) and Kilij Arslan (1079–1107) as the leaders of Muslims.³⁷ Those verses which mention the names of the Muslims commanders who fought with Crusaders shows more emphasis on his understanding of religion as a primary factor in identity. In Akif's, and in his ideal generation too, otherness is referred to as belonging to other religious groups. However, in the case of the Christian nations of the Ottoman Empire, he took side with the idea of Ottomanism which meant to unite all communities of the empire.³⁸

Âsım returns from Çannakkale, and figures out that his fellow countrymen are not self-conscious enough about their identity. Then, he shows force to bring them in his way. Moreover, he thinks he could make a coup against *Bâbîâlî* (the Sublime Porte of the Ottoman Empire). In this part, Âsım is advised not to do so. He is recommended to follow Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905) in doing reforms. In the dialogue which was exchanged between 'Abduh³⁹ and Seyed Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/1839–1897), Afghani asks from 'Abduh whether to start a revolution for saving the Islamic world as soon as possible and

³⁴ Ufak, "Islamist and Turkist conceptualization," 91–92.

³⁵ Gündoğdu, "Nation and nationalism," 127.

³⁶ "Hani milliyetin İslâm idi... Kavmiyet ne! / sarılıp sınıksı dursaydın a... Milliyetine / Arnavutluk ne demek? Var mı şeraitte yeri? / Küfür olur, başka değil, kavmini sürmek ileri / Arabın Türk'e; Lazın çerkez'e yahut Kürd'e; / Acemin Çinli'ye rüçhamı mı varmış? Nerede! / Müslümanlıkta anasır mı olurmuş? Ne gezer! / Fikr-i kavmiyeti tel'in ediyor Peygamber. / En büyük düşmanıdır ruh-i nebi tefrikanın / Adı batsın onu İslâm'a sokan kaltabanın." Ersoy, *Safahat (Seçmeler)*, 143-144.

³⁷ Ibid. 102.

³⁸ Yapıcı, "Mehmet Akif Ersoy ve Asım'ın Nesli".

³⁹ Âkif obviously did take sides with 'Abduh's school.

use force in case it is needed. On the contrary, ‘Abduh rejects this kind of revolution and proposes doing reforms by educating young people. He claims that by sending educated individuals to all over the world they can make fundamental changes in the world.⁴⁰

In addition to the above-mentioned figures, Mehmet Akif emphasized on two basic characteristics of the generation of Âsım’s education: *Fazilet* (“livelihood and virtue”) and *Ma’rifet* (“the mystical knowledge”). *Fazilet* are essential values like religious, national and moral ones as the pre-condition of *Ma’rifet*.⁴¹ *Ma’rifet* refers to the act of gaining science from the West.⁴² In Âsım, Mehmet Akif explains his ideas about the concepts of *Ma’rifet* and *Fazilet* in the following verses:

*“Hurry up to achieve perfection in your education, yes you!
My son! it is necessary for nations’ ascension
To have two powers, Ma’rifet and Fazilet
First Ma’rifet will give the community felicity,
It carries all tools, then Fazilet will come
For allocation the highest goodness and spend
If Ma’rifet would not be in an Ummah
The availability of only Fazilat would not let it to ascend.”*⁴³

Since nations are different from each other, Akif believes that alongside with trying to achieve *Marifet*, they should avoid imitation. Every nation has its own characteristics, and if a nation imitates another nation, it would be impossible to take over its merits and achievements in their entirety. Hence, in his opinion, the path that every nation needs to take to progress should be unique.⁴⁴ Meanwhile, learning cases from the West, he differentiated civilization from culture and aspired to reach contemporary Western civilization by protecting its culture. Besides, he observes that wrong Westernization could be a probable risk for his nation. In this regard, he advises young individuals in the following words:

*“Only look at the science of the West
Along with those guys, work hard!
Learn the three hundred years of science which was lost immediately
That infinite spring which is leaking in the land of science [Europe],*

⁴⁰ Ersoy, *Safahat Asım*, 120–121.

⁴¹ Yılancı, “Current nationalist discourses,” 60.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ “Hadi tahsilini ikmale tez elden, hadi sen! / Çünkü milletlerin ikmalı için, evladım / Ma’rifet, bir de fazilet... İki kudret lazım. / Ma’rifet, ilkin, ahaliye saadet verecek / Bütün esbabı taşır; sonra fazilet gelerek / O birikmiş duran esbabı alır, memleketin / Hayr’ı i’lasına tahsis ile sarf etmek için / Ma’rifet kudreti olmazsa bir ümmette eğer / Tek faziletle teali edemez, za’fa düşer.” Ersoy, *Safahat Asım*, 120–121.

⁴⁴ Şimşek, *İdeal bir genç modeli*, 107.

*Both drink up and bring those impressive waters for homeland
revive the same fountains in here,
Use your brains, my son, and be a channel between us.*"⁴⁵

In addition to the above-mentioned main characteristics, Mehmet Akif considers other physical and moral values, like being merciful, being responsible, helpfulness, and so on, for the ideal generation. Eventually, in the end of the story, *Âsım* decides to go to Berlin to study the science and technology of the West for importing them to his country and to his nation.

After a few years, the second version of *Âsım* was expected to be written, and the characters were supposed to be Babanzade Ahmed Naim (1873–1934), Hüseyin Kazım Kadri (1870–1934), and Süleyman Nazif (1870–1927).⁴⁶ These characters would have had a dialogue according to their own philosophies.⁴⁷ However, the main character would be again *Âsım* in this epic which expected to be about the Turkish War of Independence, and *Âsım* hearing upon the occupation of their land decides to come back his country and participate in the war. Nevertheless, Mehmet Akif could never realize this work due to his impaired state of health.⁴⁸

Concluding Remarks

Mehmet Akif Ersoy's *Âsım* is considered as one of the Turkish literary masterpieces in which he describes his idea about the ideal generation which would save their homeland and assures the future of their nation. Additionally, the work includes famous poems like *Çanakkale Şehitlerine* ("For the Çanakkale Martyrs"), *Zulmü alkışlayamam* ("I Can't Applaud Tyranny") among others. In the story, Köse İmâm complains about collapsing families, moralities and education. Despite Köse İmâm's despair, Hocazâde is hopeful, and he supports a generation like *Âsım* who never allows its honor to be sullied. For the generation, Akif lists some characteristics and having deep belief with emphasizing on the priority of the *Ummah*, especially those who were under the rule of the Ottoman Empire and kept their place from nationalism.

Moreover, for Mehmet Akif Ersoy, education is crucial in order to build the generation. Therefore, he emphasizes on two crucial concepts, *Fazilet* and *Ma'rifet*. He accepts the West scientific superiority over the Ottomans, however, he proposes to this generation to learn the science and technology of the West and adapt it to local circumstances. After the establishment of modern Turkey and making reforms based on Western values, which was against his belief, he left Turkey and his ideal generation did not come true. However, the work made its place in modern Turkey. Although he was supposed to write the second ver-

⁴⁵ "Sade Garb'ın yalnız ilmüne dönsün yüzünüz. / O çocuklarla beraber gece gündüz didinin; / Giden üç yüz senelik ilmi sık elden edinin. / Fen diyarında sızan namütenahi pınarı, / Hem için, hem getirin yurda o nafi suları. / Aynı menbaları ihya için artık burada, / Kafanız işlesin oğlum, kanal olsun arada." Ersoy, *Safahat Âsım*, 120–121.

⁴⁶ Öztürk, *Millî şairimiz*, 70.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

sion of *Âsım*, however, he passed away. It seems likely that the work would have presented the image of a generation more compatible with modern Turkey.

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An overview of Mehmet Akif Ersoy's ideal generation in Âsım

There were four various leading ideas among the Ottoman intellectuals in the late Ottoman Empire: Ottomanism, Islamism, Turkism, and Westernism. As one of the intellectuals, Mehmet Akif Ersoy (1873–1936) emphasized on Islamism and rejected the other ideas based on his experience and thoughts. Hence, in light of his Islamist idea, he created his notable masterpiece *Âsım* in the sixth volume of *Safâhat*. It is written based on narrative and dialogue among four people including Hocazâde, Köse İmâm, Emin and Âsım in the Ottoman language. Mehmet Akif Ersoy tried to create an ideal generation and a model for the Ottoman's people based on the primary sources of Islam which could be applied in the modern world as well. Although the work was written almost a century ago, it has still been considered as an inspiring story among some Turks. This paper attempts to investigate *Âsım* epos as a one of masterpieces of Mehmet Akif Ersoy in terms of the main characteristics of the ideal generation which was expected to be a model for the future generation of Turks.