

**TREATING TURKISH-ARMENIAN RELATIONS WITH SYMBOLISM  
IN LITERARY WORKS: THE EXAMPLE OF ÖMER SEYFETTIN'S "ASHAB-I  
KEHFİMİZ" (DIARY OF AN ARMENIAN YOUTH)**

*Cafer ULU,*  
*ulucfr@gmail.com*

***Abstract***

*In the latter years of the Ottoman Empire, Turkish-Armenian Relations was one of the issues that regularly dominated the nation's political and intellectual life. Some writers were able to convey a heated topic of the time using symbols rather than by speaking directly to the issue. This approach has also been followed by certain authors who are concerned that criticizing the present administration and its policies may result in fines or punishments. By employing symbols, making up fictional characters to represent both their own and the other party's thinking, and telling tales about actual events and concepts, they were able to do away with these fines and penalties. Ömer Seyfettin's "Ashab-ı Kehfimiz" (Diary of an Armenian Youth), which is the subject of the article, is such a work. The researchers who will examine social and political events should consider such works, which will make their research more equipped. In this novel, the author put himself in the place of an Armenian youth and wrote down the events as if he were keeping a diary, and conveyed the events and the general scene in this way.*

***Keywords:*** *Turkish-Armenian Relations, Ömer Seyfettin, Symbolism.*

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**1. Introduction**

Before entering into the main subject, it should be noted that Turks and Armenians have been in contact in every field throughout history. One of these fields is the field of literature. Both societies mentioned each other in oral and written literature and made great contributions. Armenians have produced works written in Armenian letters since early times. These works are an integral part of Turkish culture. The first ones that come to mind are newspapers and magazines, sermons and prayers, court decisions of the Armenian community, marriage records, notary deeds and

chronicles. In addition, Turkish grammar, morality, dictionary and subjectbooks were published in Armenian letters. There are many Turkish proverbs and idioms in these works. Turkish books with Armenian letters were also published in Turkish lands. (Ulu, 2007, p.505-518) There are such works written by Armenians about Turks, as well as countless works written by Turks that deal with Turkish-Armenian relations. One of them is the work of Ömer Seyfettin, which constitutes the main subject of our article.

In 1884, Ömer Seyfettin was born in Gonen. He was one of the four kids born to Fatma Hanım and Major Şevki Bey. The family travelled to Istanbul after leaving Gonen. After graduating from the Military Veteran High School in 1896 at the start of the school year in Istanbul, Ömer Seyfettin went to the Military High School in Edirne. In 1900, after arriving back in Istanbul, he started the Mekteb-i Harbiye-i Ahanne. He earned a degree in 1903. He served with the Third Army's İzmir Redif Division's Kuşadası Redif Battalion as an infantry ensign. In 1906, he was appointed to the İzmir Gendarmerie School as a teacher. Ömer Seyfettin, who followed the intellectual and literary activities in İzmir, met the intellectuals who were among them. As a matter of fact, Baha Tevfik, who knows western culture, encourages him to increase his knowledge of French. He got important ideas about national literature made in plain Turkish and a national language from Necip Türkçü.

Ömer Seyfettin was assigned to Thessaloniki Third Army in January 1909. After the name of Hüsün ve Poetry magazine, which was published in Thessaloniki, was changed to Genç Kalemler, Ömer Seyfettin's first editorial titled "*Yeni Lisan*" was published anonymously in 1911. Those who formed the Young Pens writing committee necessarily dispersed upon the start of the Balkan War. Ömer Seyfettin is called to the army again and even becomes a prisoner. He read constantly during his captivity in Nafliyon. He wrote his stories such as "*Bastard*", "*Mehdi*", "*Freedom Flags*" during these years. These stories are published in *Türk Yurdu*. During his captivity, he gains experiences that will be important for his writing life, both by reading and living.

Ömer Seyfettin returned to Istanbul in 1913 when his life in captivity was over. After a while, he was appointed as the editor-in-chief of the journal *Türk Sözü*. Here he writes articles on the basis of Turkist thought. He started to work as a teacher in Kabataş Sultanisi in 1914 and continued this duty until his death. In 1915, he married Calibe Hanım, the daughter of Doctor Besim Ethem Bey,

one of the notables of the Committee of Union and Progress. This marriage breaks down even though he has a daughter named Güner.

From 1917 until his death on March 6, 1920; His stories and articles are published in journals such as Yeni Mecmua, Şair, Navy, Büyük Mecmua, Yeni Dünya, Diken, Türk Kadını and in newspapers Vakit, Zaman and İfham. Ömer Seyfettin, whose illness increased on February 25, 1920, died on March 6, 1920.

Ömer Seyfettin lived a short life of 36 years. He became one of the leaders of the nationalism and Turkism movement during the disintegration of the country. Important personalities of the period such as Ziya Gökalp and Ali Canip had great influences on the formation of the intellectual structure of the newly established nationalist Republic of Turkey.

## **2. About the “Diary of an Armenian Youth”**

Ömer Seyfettin, who also dealt with the Armenian issue, one of the most important issues of his time, wrote a social novel containing this subject. Although it is a novel in terms of form, this work also contains memoirs.

The original name of the story is "*Ashab-ı Kehfimiz*", and the first edition was published in 1918 in Istanbul at Kanaat Kitaphanesi with 101 pages. The same work was republished 54 years later by Bilge Türk Erdemli, with an introductory article added, under the name "*Diary of an Armenian Youth*". The statement "...we strongly recommend that contemporary Turkish-Islamic idealists read..." in the introduction letter of this edition published in 1972, this edition was overshadowed by a certain ideology. The same work was later published by Hülya Argunşah with a more impartial approach in 1999 in the corpus of Dergah Publications, "*Omer Seyfettin with All His Works*", with the original name "*Ashab-ı Kehfimiz*".

Ömer Seyfettin wrote this mini novel 5 (five) years before its first publication date. (1915) In his own words, this work aimed to compare the ideas of intellectuals with social realities rather than to produce a literary work. With these thoughts, the statesmen he met after the Constitutional Monarchy; He states that they defend that "*Ottomanism is a common nationality*" and that they "*belong to the Ottoman nation without distinction of individual, gender or sect*" living in the Ottoman Empire. He stated that these thoughts were just a delusion and a crude illusion that the

non-national Tanzimat had given birth to. He thinks that it is not possible to create a "*common nationality*" from the union of individuals with different religions, languages, upbringing, historical backgrounds, and sources of pride.

Ömer Seyfettin tried to explain with the example that Ottomanism was nothing but the name of the state, that the Germans living in Austria were not the "*Nation of Austria*", but that they were a German nation. With the same logic, he states that we, who speak Turkish, have a history of thousands of years and that we are "*genuine Turks*" no matter where and under which state name we live. For this reason, he finds it ridiculous to attribute other meanings to the word "*Ottomanism*" for political and social purposes.

In the preface, he continued his political criticism with concrete examples and states that the political power could not see the truth after the Balkan Wars. Ömer Seyfettin, who likes the phrase "*the language fits my language, my religion fits my religion*" when describing the nation of the plain Turkish villagers, reproaches that some intellectuals did not attach importance to language and religion in the last reforms (Tanzimat edict and the changes after it). He states that the developing events taught them a great lesson and that the value of nationality was understood.

At the end of the foreword, Ömer Seyfettin, who increased the criticism considerably, said, "... *those who are still against patriotism and Turkism; What are their aims in language, literature, art, politics –which they cannot openly admit? If there is, isn't it always these empty dreams?*" he asks.

Ömer Seyfettin gives us some clues about the content of the memoir in his preface. The foreword is signed "*Sarıyer 1918*". Although it is a story, Ömer Seyfettin puts himself in the place of an Armenian youth and writes down the events as if he were keeping a diary, giving clues about the events in Ömer Seyfettin's period, and even helping us to see his ideas clearly in some places.

In the work, the author draws the events and the general scene from the pen of an Armenian youth. The hero of the story, the Armenian youth (Hosegur Dikran Hayikyan), who lost his father during the Armenian revolutions, deals with the necessity of loyalty to the Ottoman State, of which he was a subject at first. Armenian youth can say "*I am Ottoman*" in a very candid way. Ottomanism according to the youth; He had a structure in which everyone, whether Muslim or non-Muslim,

Turkish or from other races, could express himself. In this respect, he became a member of an association (Ottoman Coalition Club) in 1908, which he thought shared these views. This association changed their positive views about the Ottoman Empire and the political power of that day. Because the ideas that dominate the aforementioned association are quite different from the concept of "*nationality*" understood by him. The administrators of the association try to form a new nationality by forgetting which nationality the members of the society belong to. The Armenian youth who attended the meetings of the association said that the members had conflicts about their nationality, which is why the non-Turkish members left the association. Within the framework of his own views, the young begin to struggle to get rid of the contradictions and mistakes that the members fall into. Although he tries to understand that it is not possible to create a new nation from different nations, he cannot make those there obey.

Meanwhile, the Westerners, who could not defeat the Ottoman Empire on the battlefields, adopted the path of internal dismemberment. He caused the non-Turkish elements to revolt against the capital, by causing discord under the name of "*nationality*" and "*nation*" among the peoples that formed the state. Non-Turkish elements, who had lived in brotherhood for 6 centuries, had turned the Ottoman lands into a war zone. Despite all these experiences, the mentioned association is still trying to realize the dream of "*ittihad-ı anasır*". All these anti-Turkish movements led to the emergence of the idea of "*nationality*" and "*nation*" and "*Turkism*" in the Turkish people.

Turkists held demonstrations condemning the association, which denied the existence of Turks in the Ottoman Empire. The members of the association, who were afraid of this excitement of the people, became very uneasy and the association was abolished. As a result of these events, the Armenian youth, who is the hero of the story, decided that after the dissolution of the association, remaining as an "*Armenian Ottoman*" was the only way of salvation.

Ömer Seyfettin openly criticizes the attempts to break the racial ties and separate the Ottomanism from the concepts of religion and nation by putting himself in the shoes of an Armenian youth. He gave the messages that Turkism is an indispensable value and that the political movements exhibited to eliminate it will surely fail. Although our hero in the work is an Armenian youth, this young man is actually a symbol, a tool to convey Ömer Seyfettin's own ideas.

One of the issues that should be mentioned in the work is; There are very important clues in the story for those who are interested in Armenian Studies. Because it is possible to follow the development of events according to the dates in the work written in the form of a diary. For example, the Armenian youth who became a member of an association in 1908 reflects the political views of that association to us. It is possible to clearly understand what the association understands from Ottomanism and what it understands from this word. If we think that the political power was the Union and Progress administration at that time, we see that the portrait drawn by the hero coincides with the political views of the period. In fact, the fact that some of the members of the Union and Progress left their nationality aside in the struggle for power and cooperated with the Armenians shows that what is written here in its diary form is very close to the truth.

In terms of history, we learn about an event that took place on September 10, 1908, as well as the views of Ömer Seyfettin in the person of a young Armenian hero. In the event; In Beşiktaş, the daughter of a Muslim gardener runs away to a Greek youth. Bahçivan complains about Rum to the police station. The girl and Rum are arrested. Afterwards, the enraged people attack the police station. They beat the girl and the Greek so much that the Greek dies. The Greeks, who take the Greek's dead body, make various demonstrations by showing the body in Beyoğlu. The hero writes that he was in the demonstrations and shouted that the Greeks would one day take revenge on the Turks. The same issue has been mentioned in Armenian studies and the comments made are the same as those of Ömer Seyfettin in the person of the Armenian youth. The hero, who brought up the topic of "*Patriarchates*" right after, states that they are moving as "*Our old law, our old privileges*". In the following lines, he talks about the "*seeds sown by the Patriarchates*". Ömer Seyfettin created an opportunity to discuss the opposing views of a Turkish nationalist and minorities through this event. If you pay attention, the same event takes place in our history and Revolution history books exactly with Ömer Seyfettin's approach. As a result, Ömer Seyfettin, from the pen of the Armenian youth, conveyed his thoughts.

In the story, he uses the expression "*big revolution...*", reminding that the Armenian events were not even interpreted as "*revolt*" by the Turks, but simply "*Armenian Noise*" if it is mentioned. Here again, he made a criticism of the Ottoman administration and interpreted the Armenian movements as a great revolutionary movement.

In his memoir, he touches on many issues, from the relations of the Union and Progress with the Armenians to the views of the Unionists on nationalism. Our Armenian hero, in his notes dated June 11, 1909-Moda, states that he met Niyazi Bey, who had completed his law education in France, and Armenian Mızıkya, who was a Member of Parliament. Here, the hero, who tells the ideas of Niyazi Bey at length, expresses how self-sacrificing the Turks are in bringing their nationality to the fore, and that "*Ottomanism*" is ahead of everything. At the end of his words, he says (Erdemli , B. T. 1972, p.32) "*What a contradiction, O Lord!... However, we even claim that the Kurds are Armenians*" and Ömer Seyfettin criticizes the Unionists for their reluctant attitude towards nationalism in the words of our hero. In the following days, the Armenian youth meets Niyazi Bey again on the ferry and learns that a new society has been established. On the basis of Ottomanism, it was a society in which only Ottomanism existed, without any gender or sect (Erdemli , B. T. 1972, p.34). Although the Armenian youth did not believe that this would happen, he thought that the Committee of Union and Progress made Turks forget the Turkish nationality; He remembers that they removed the word "*Turk*" from their history, literature, and the word "*Turkey*" from their geography, and he asks himself why not. Finally, he says, "*I think... Ah, if this dream were a reality*". The Armenian youth, who received a letter from Niyazi Bey dated 17 August 1909, quoted the letter exactly. In the letter, Niyazi Bey informs that the "*Ottoman Fusion Club*" has been opened and wants him to join this club as well. In the aforementioned letter, he listed the other members of the club as follows;

Diyamandis Efendi (Greek)

Nikfor Aniklef Efendi (Bulgarian)

Nikolaviç Efendi

Fraşarlı Nadir Bey

Moiz Bori Efendi (Jewish)

Salihü'l-ayni Efendi

Casimü'l Kürdi Bey

Louis Durant Bey

Sadullah Behçet Bey

Hasan Rudi Bey Şair Said Bey

Hoca Bilali Efendi

Doktor Eserullah Natık Bey.

In fact, all these names symbolized the nations living in the Ottoman Empire.

The location of the club was stated at the place number 77 in Süleymaniye. Our hero writes that he joined the club in the notes he kept on August 20, 1909. Continuing his lines, he makes the following comment: *"...I thought in vain for two or three days. There is no harm in joining such a club... Still being afraid of the poor Turks who have already abandoned their nationality... This is so pointless... Am I the only one who isn't Turkish? There are Greeks, Albanians, Serbians, Arabs from all nationalities..."* he says. Ömer Seyfettin actually displays a critical attitude by putting similar statements at the end of most of the chapters.

Our hero writes on his hound dated May 11, 1910 that he will go to Marseille as the deputy of the Thracian Company. Niyazi Bey says that they will pay the eighty lira salary that they will not go, but the Armenian youth is leaving. It returns again in April 1912. When he goes to the club, he sees that many issues have been discussed for 2 years, but no result has been achieved. Language issues are discussed. It is being discussed whether to accept *"Esperanto"* or *"Latin"* as a language. The Armenian youth meets Diyamandis, a member of the society, at the Tokatlıyan hotel and asks about the language issue. Diyamandis gives him the following very meaningful answer; *"Turks don't have a language anyway. They may accept it, but the Greeks have an excellent language and literature of five to ten thousand years."* The Armenian youth thinks that the Armenians will not give up the Armenian language either. The Armenian youth sees that the Arab, Greek, Albanian, Serbian, Bulgarian and Jewish members do not attend the meetings. Attributing these people's non-participation to the fact that Turks are ideologues, he thinks that the *"Ottomanism"* delusion fits all their logic.

In his memoir, the Armenian youth, who said that there were great changes in his ideas when the dates showed July 5, 1912, includes the following statements: *"Oh my God!... I, Dikran Hayıkyan, the orphan whose father was killed while leading the revolution that broke out for the revival of the Armenian nation... A moment. I believed in Ottomanism, huh!"* says.

Ömer Seyfettin, who discusses his own views and the thoughts of those who have Ottomanism ideas from the pen of an Armenian youth, was not content with the concepts of "nationalism" and "Ottomanism" at the beginning of the story, and shifted to the language issue in the following pages. After stating that some of the Ottoman intellectuals wanted Latin and some Hebrew to be

accepted, he wrote that some insisted that Ottoman Turkish, which was under the great influence of Arabic and Persian, would be sufficient.

The Armenian youth discusses the population of Turks and minorities in his notes dated 30 August 1912. He says he heard from an Englishman that 14 million Turkish speakers are completely Turkish, whereas the total of Armenians and Greeks is only around 3 million. He states that the aim of the Armenians and Greeks is to drown the Turks in Anatolia in the Kızılırmak. The Armenian youth who took the notes writes that he is afraid of being defeated in the war that the Turks are in (Balkan Wars) because of the concern that the feelings of Turkishness will awaken.

Ömer Seyfettin also discussed the issue of religion in the person of the Armenian youth. Again, he conveys a discussion that took place at a meeting of the association and Hodja Bali Efendi stated that Islam; He stated that it was a combination of the religions of Judaism, Christianity and Sabiyyah, and that all Ottoman members could be reorganized religiously by making some changes. Sadullah Behçet was completely against religion. Hosni Rudi was saying, *"Let's be irreligious like the Japanese."*

In Teşrin-i sani's notes dated 1912, the author goes further and talks about the cross that will be erected on the domes of Hagia Sophia, when Constantine, the real owner of Istanbul, comes. In a note dated 28 Kanun-ı Sani, 1913, after the Armenian youth stated how happy they were when they heard the cannon, prayers were openly praying for the victory of the Christians in all churches; He mentions that the Bulgarians did not leave mosques and minarets in the places they passed through, they burned them down and made all of them Christians. (Here, it is seen that Ömer Seyfettin was very interested in the political events of the period, occupations and wars. This imaginary memoir is in full harmony with the events that occur chronologically. The Balkan Wars, which included the Bulgars in the aforementioned dates, and the Ottoman state had to withdraw to a large extent. did.)

After 1913, it was given the impression that there was a break for 12 years, and the notes kept in 1925 were started. He considers what he did and wrote in the past as *"An incomplete, messy, miserable chapter of celibacy ..."*. He interprets the days he lived in the association as meetings held with the illusion of fusion of the Ottoman Empire. He conveys the reactions from all over the country against the anti-nationalist articles published in the pamphlet called *"Humanity"* they

published in those days, and stated that there was a great uproar in all cities, and that not only Turks but also Armenians, Greeks and Arabs were angry at the articles that denounced this nationality. The Armenian Patriarchate also found the Turks' attempt to coalesce to be ridiculous.

A show was also held to protest such writings of the club. After the demonstration, students from Turkish schools, medical schools and private schools marched. After that, private schools, Turkish Hearths, Altun Army, Turkish Power and other members of the society... Turkish tradesmen's societies, sports committees, aviators, scouts, riders, machinists, electricians... they all made the transition. As a result of this demonstration, the reaction of the members of the association was sometimes thought-provoking and sometimes funny. For example, Sirullah Natic; *"Oh, these Turkists are vagrants! They are deceiving all the Ottomans, while groaning"* Hüsnü Rudi saw this enormous crowd; *"I think I belong to the Turks on my mother's side,"* he said.

In this memoir, most events actually symbolize some real events. The protesting crowd here – which Ömer Seyfettin describes as enormous – represented the Turkish nation, which was considerably more than the group that tried to destroy nationalism and the minorities accompanying it. At the same time, by expressing that some of the members of the society we mentioned above went to their hometowns, it implies the states that left the Ottoman Empire with national feelings and gained their independence. Ömer Seyfettin describes this situation as follows; *"Diyamandis went to Athens with the Thessaloniki deputy. Perhaps there was an overseer there. After the war, Angelof became the undersecretary of the Bulgarian embassy in Istanbul... Fraserli Nadir became the press director of the Kingdom of Albania. Istanbul newspapers once wrote that he left Islam and became a Catholic..."*

In actuality, the Armenian kid included information about himself at the conclusion of the book and noted that it was written in 1925, which is five years after Mer Seyfettin's passing. "As for me, what have I become into... I occasionally turn into a fervent patriot, says. The Armenian youth stresses that family and nationality are same. The young Armenian guy, who combines his nationality with that of his wife, sighs and adds, *"Oh wonderful woman, great woman who loves her mother's language..."* after claiming that pearls dropped from his wife's eyelashes because he wrote his diary in Turkish. The Armenian expresses his unhappiness at the incapacity of the nascent Armenian people to write in Turkish here as well.

When the story is generally considered, which is a memoir, the political events and wars that occurred in the final years of the Ottoman Empire and in which the minorities played a significant role occurred chronologically.

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