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THE GENESIS AND EVOLUTION OF LITERARY CRITICISM IN TURKISH LITERATURE: FROM ORAL TRADITIONS TO MODERN DISCOURSE

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Abstract

This article traces the historical development of literary criticism within Turkish literature, analyzing its transformation from pre-Islamic oral traditions and classical Ottoman Divan literature to the emergence of modern Western-style criticism during the Tanzimat (Reform) era. The study explores how criticism, initially embedded in oral culture through genres like satire (*hiciv*) and poetic assessment, evolved through various intermediary forms such as *tezkiye* (biographical anthologies), *şerh* (commentaries), *dibâçe* (prefaces), and *belâgat* (rhetoric) books. It argues that the concept of literary criticism in the Turkish-Islamic tradition was fundamentally different from its Western counterpart, functioning more as a tool for identifying flaws and praising excellence within a highly stylized and tradition-bound poetic framework. The turning point occurred in the 19th century with the Tanzimat reforms, when Western literary genres, including formal criticism, began to be adopted. This led to a paradigm shift, as pioneers like Namık Kemal and Şinasi introduced new critical concepts and methods, initiating a debate about the nature of art, language, and national identity that would shape modern Turkish literary thought.

Keywords: *Turkish Literature, Literary Criticism, Tanzimat Literature, Divan Literature, Tradition, Modernization, Şerh, Tezkiye*

1. Introduction

Literary criticism is as old as literature itself. The moment a work of art is created, a natural human impulse emerges to evaluate, interpret, and judge it (Talibzadə, 1984, p. 7). From the earliest days of conscious human life, people have engaged in criticism – distinguishing the beautiful from the ugly, the true from the false, and the ideal from the

flawed. However, the formalized concept of “literary criticism” as a distinct genre is a relatively modern phenomenon, particularly in the context of Turkish literature (Ercilasun, 2009). This article will examine the long and complex journey of how this critical impulse evolved, from its roots in the oral traditions of the Turkic people and the intricate system of classical Ottoman poetry to its eventual

transformation into a recognizable, Western-style discipline with the Tanzimat reforms of the 19th century (Tanpınar, 1969).

Before the Tanzimat, the term *tenkit* (criticism) in its modern sense did not exist in Turkish. In the pre-Islamic oral culture, evaluation was a communal act. A poem or story was accepted or rejected by the community's response, manifested in applause or silence. The critical sentiment was expressed through genres like *hiciv* (satire) and *taşlama* (lampoon), which were used to criticize social ills, personal flaws, or administrative mistakes (Sungur, 2001). As Köprülü (1926) suggests, even the earliest written monuments, such as the Orkhon Inscriptions, have been interpreted by some scholars as containing traces of critical thought.

With the adoption of Islam and the subsequent emergence of Divan literature (spanning roughly from the 12th to the 19th century), a new, more formal system of evaluation began to take shape. However, it was not criticism in the Western sense. In the classical Ottoman literary tradition, criticism was a tool for assessing a poet's technical skill, originality, and adherence to established poetic conventions (Levend, 1980). It was less about deconstructing meaning and more about judging quality. The dissertation outlines several key genres through which this evaluative function was performed:

1. Şerh (Commentary): The primary purpose of a *şerh* was to explain and illuminate a text, making it more accessible to the reader. Commentators did not just explicate; they also engaged in a form of analysis, often building upon or debating the interpretations of their predecessors (Sultanlı, 2019). This practice, as noted by Holbrook (1998), is comparable to what modern scholars might call a "close reading".

2. Tezkire (Biographical Anthologies): These were compilations of information about poets, including their lives, works, and samples of their poetry (İsen et al., 2011). Crucially, *tezkire* authors did not just give dry biographical facts; they evaluated the poets' works, praising their strengths and criticizing their weaknesses (Tolasa, 1983). This made *tezkires* an invaluable source of early literary criticism. For instance, the critic Latîfi, in his *tezkire*, provided a detailed taxonomy of po-

ets, categorizing them based on their creativity, skill, and originality. He even offered a spirited defense of the poet Şeyhî against previous critiques, demonstrating a sophisticated understanding of the need to judge a work by the standards of its own time (Canım, 1992).

3. Dibâce (Preface): Many classical works, particularly *mesnevî* poems, began with a prose preface (*dibâce*). These prefaces were more than just introductions; they were platforms where the poet would expound on their philosophy of art, the nature of poetry, and their place in the literary tradition (Üzgör, 1990). This was a space for theoretical justification and, at times, for responding to critics. Şeyh Galib's preface to *Hüsn ü Aşk*, for example, is a powerful defense of innovation in poetry, where he criticizes those who, like Nabi, are content to imitate old masters and argues for the creation of new meanings (Yüksel, 1980).

4. Nəzirə Dergiləri (Parallel Poems): A *nazire* was a poem written in response to another poet's work, using the same meter and rhyme. These collections were a form of "silent criticism." By seeing which poems were most frequently imitated, one could deduce which poets, styles, and themes were considered most influential and praiseworthy (Köksal, 2003). It was a way for the literary community to bestow its collective approval.

The 19th century marked a profound shift with the Tanzimat reforms. As the Ottoman Empire turned its face toward the West, it opened the floodgates for new ideas, institutions, and literary genres (Ortaylı, 2006). As Tanpınar (1969, p. 389) famously stated, "Tanzimat itself was a movement born from the idea of criticism." This era introduced concepts like public opinion, individual rights, and social utility, which had a direct impact on literature.

The pioneers of this new era, such as Şinasi, Ziya Paşa, and especially Namık Kemal, fundamentally changed the function of literary criticism. They did not just judge the technical merits of a poem; they used criticism as a weapon for political and social change (Kaplan, 1948).

Namık Kemal is widely regarded as the father of modern Turkish literary criticism. His manifesto-like article, "Lisan-ı Osmanînin Edebiyatı Hakkında Bazı Mülâhazâtı

Şâmildir,” was a groundbreaking attack on the entire edifice of Divan literature (Namık Kemal, 1866). He criticized its artificiality, its foreign influences (Persian and Arabic), its incomprehensible language for the common people, and its lack of social purpose (Özön, 1963). For Kemal, literature had a mission: to serve the nation, to awaken the public conscience, and to promote progress. In the preface to his play *Celaleddin Harzemşah*, he forcefully condemned the unreal, fantastical world of classical poetry and championed a new literature rooted in “truth” and “nature” (Namık Kemal, 2020). His polemical writings against Ziya Paşa’s *Harabat*, an anthology meant to revive classical poetry, showed the new generation’s determination to sever ties with the past (Tanpınar, 2006).

The emergence of a “new literature” sparked intense debates about fundamental issues of form and content. The most prominent of these was the **“Heca-Aruz” debate (the meter controversy)** (Kolcu, 1993). The *aruz* meter, borrowed from Persian and Arabic prosody, had been the dominant form for centuries. Its defenders, like Rıza Tevfik and Ömer Naci, argued for its inherent musicality and superiority (Kolcu, 1993). On the other side, champions of the national literature, like Mehmet Emin Yurdakul, advocated for the *hece* (syllabic) meter, which they considered to be genuinely Turkish and more accessible to the public (Tevetoğlu, 1998). Fuad Köprülü captured this sentiment by stating that *hece* was the “national meter” through

which the Turkish soul could be expressed (Köprülü, 1926).

This was not just a technical argument about meters; it was a battle for the soul of the new nation being built after the fall of the Empire. A language and literature that were close to the people were seen as essential for the creation of a modern, national identity (Berkes, 1978).

6. Conclusion

The journey of literary criticism in Turkish literature is a story of a profound and often painful transformation. It began with the inherent, communal evaluation of oral traditions and evolved into a sophisticated but formulaic system within the classical Divan paradigm. This system, while employing nuanced methods of appreciation and judgment, was fundamentally different from the Western model of criticism, which was gaining prominence as a secular, intellectual, and often ideological genre.

The Tanzimat reforms represented a decisive break. Writers like Namık Kemal did not just introduce a new type of criticism; they reinvented its purpose. They transformed it from a tool for aesthetic appraisal into an instrument of social, political, and linguistic change. This laid the groundwork for the intense literary debates of the modern and republican eras, where criticism became a central force in forging a new national identity and a modern literary voice for Turkey (Okay, 2005; Enginün, 2007).

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