Berrin Aksoy[1]

The Significance of Author-Translators in Turkey in the Emergence of Modern Turkish Literature[2]

Abstract: *The emergence of modern Turkish literature dates back to the translation activities initiated by the Ottoman intellectuals during the Reformation period in the 19th century. With the westernization efforts of the Ottoman State, the literary polysystem entered into a new phase and translation efforts gained a momentum by means of the authors of that period, among which, Ahmet Midhat Efendi deserves a special attention. Later, with the establishment of the Turkish Republic in 1923, translation activities turned into a much more organized and planned manner, and author-translators again became instrumental in initiating new genres, styles and modes of expressions through translations in the Turkish literary polysystem. Nurullah Ataç was one of the most influential figures in that sense. Both Ahmet Midhat Efendi, in the 19th century and Nurullah Ataç in the 20th century advocated the use of pure and simple translation in an effort to domesticate the translations of Western sources and although they belonged to different time periods, Ahmet Midhat Efendi and Nurullah Ataç believed in the importance and capacity of translations towards enriching a national literature.*

Key words: *author-translators, Turkish literature, literary polysystem, enrichment of national literatures, the emergence of the Turkish novel*

Translation signals transformations and cultural interaction. People have for ages wanted language and translation to become a consolidation process in the interactions between cultures and between countries and nations. Irresistibly in almost any sort of cultural initiatives, we have come to see translation activity playing an important role. There are many reasons for that, one of which is probably its nature of endless potential and possibilities due to its dependency on language both on a social as well as a personal context. The relationship between translation and other disciplines in the humanities such as Literary Studies, Literary criticism, Creative writing have been taken up and dealt with in many academic and scholarly studies and publications. Yet, as Susan Bassnett writes:

> 'Translation is often seen as inferior to "creative" or "original" writing, with the translator somehow down-graded into a second-class citizen with a lesser talent. Often in reviews,

[1] Atılım University, Ankara, Turkey

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> the name of the translator is never mentioned and critics write on blithely as though they had actually read the work in its original form without having had to resort to the aid of a translation. This second-class status is enshrined in the economics of book production also, where writers are often paid for more than translators. Yet, without translators countless literary works would be inaccessible to generations of readers around the world; we may claim to have read great works from Ancient Greece, Renaissance Europe, nineteenth century Russia or twentieth century Latin America, but we have all had to resort at some point to translations.' (Bassnett www.upf.edu)

From that perspective, one cannot ignore the enormous influence of translators in the cultural activities in a global context. What is more, this role of translation has curiously attracted the interest of the authors themselves who have translated extensively either themselves or other authors. The intention in either case is to introduce a new author to another literature, to make the genre, the style or the content known in other languages and cultures. Such an act undoubtedly involves a lot of effort, as well as an understanding and interpreting of the original author and his/her output in its original context. Then comes conveying, transferring or we may as well call it, recreating that output in a totally foreign context, which would nevertheless look familiar. Susan Bassnett stresses the importance of author-translators in the following paragraph:

> 'The indivisibility between writing and translating is apparent once we start to consider the careers of many great literary figures who are primarily remembered for their novels, plays, or poems but who also translated. Alexander Pope may be seen as a great satirist, but in his own time he was hailed as one of the leading translators of Homer. In marginalizing the importance of translation as a shaping force in literary history, critics have overlooked the significance of the translations made by eminent writers.' (Bassnett)

It is exactly at this point that one may stress the influence of authors as translators in their native countries during certain phases of literary polysystems.

The above mentioned situation can best be exemplified and accounted in efforts to study the instruments contributing to the development of modern Turkish Literature.

Translation activity and translators have always played a very significant role in the Turkish literary tradition, beginning from the Ottoman Empire well into the 1960's in the Turkish Republic. In order to draw a picture of the emergence of Modern Turkish literature, and the significant role played by author-translators, it may be worthwhile to cite a famous Turkish philosopher, H. Ziya Ülken's view about translation. Ülken writes that the history of translation helps us who are interested in translation and literature to better understand the contribution of translation to civilization and to the development of cultural and intellectual life. Translation, which is the meeting of different cultures and civilizations, introduces nations to various perspectives on their path to modernization and intellectual advancement. According to Ülken, opening up to civilization involves opening the doors to all the influences of cultural, scientific and intellectual activities abroad. In other words, translation is the power behind the awakening periods of nations which constitutes the turning point in the progress towards advancement and enlightenment (Ülken 1997).

Translation has never been an isolated activity. There is always a context in which translation takes place. Translation has always served a special purpose and it has been

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shaped by a certain force or reason. Even-Zohar puts forward three situations that activate translation:

1. when a literary polysystem is still young, and in the process of being established,
2. when a literature is either 'peripheral' or 'weak', or both,
3. when there are turning points, crises, or literary vacuums in a literature (1221).

Of these situations, the 3rd one describes very adequately the literary climate of the Ottomans in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, when a series of reforms which gave their name 'Tanzimat: Reformation' to the period took place as means in order to open up to the West and to start transformation towards westernization and development. During this era the spread of Western-style institutions took place in education and administration as well as the development of press and journalism. According to Dilek Yalçın-Çelik, before the 19th century, Turkish society had met with the modern understanding of the West on a military and political platform. Consequently the first encounter of Turkish society with the modern understanding of the West took place in the 19th century. Hence, the adventure of Turkish people on the way to become a modern individual began with great contribution from the newly developed genres in literature, under the influence of the Western models during that era (Yalçın-Çelik IV) where there was an unprecedented increase of especially French genres such as the play, the novel, biography and short story as well as memoires (Mitler 7). Among these genres, the novel, especially the popular novel gained a wide audience, many of which were inspired by the comedies and novels of French authors such as Moliere, Dumas Pére or Zola.

Hence, it may be stated that translation has played a major role especially in the emergence of the novel genre in the Turkish Literature in the second half of the 19th century. The background for the development of this genre owes a great deal to the framework which also created the conditions for the Reformation (*Tanzimat*) period in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century. According to the Ottoman intellectuals, westernization efforts could best be disseminated in the Ottoman society by means of employing the novel genre as a tool to carry out this purpose. The cultural and administrative innovations that took place especially in the second half of the 19th century urged the Ottoman intellectuals to introduce the novel genre which was regarded as the most suitable mode of expression for the initiation of the innovations into the Ottoman society in those times. The Ottoman intellectuals were seeking new genres, new themes and new styles of expression in literature in line with the aspirations for westernization efforts. Although the novel in the western sense and structure was not present in the Ottoman literature at that time, the Islamic narrative techniques were well known in the West through works such as " A Thousand and One Night Stories", and its traces could be seen in Matthew Arnold's "Sohrab and Rustem" or Mozart's "Saraydan Kız Kaçırma" (*The Abduction from the Seraglio*). Hence, the traces of those narrative techniques could also be seen in the first Turkish novels in the 19th century (Finn 10). The Ottoman narrative as a matter of fact was divided into Court literature (Divan Edebiyati) and Popular literature (Halk Edebiyati). In the Court literature and Popular literature poetry was the dominant mode although narratives such as long love stories had an important place as well. As a result, story-telling and fictionilizing events and plots were not foreign to the Ottoman

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literature; these and other traditional factors such as the epic, the narrative poem called *mesnevi* contributed to the emergence of the novel genre as well.

In the context of such a frame, the necessary conditions and all the requirements for the emergence and the development of the Turkish novel were present in parallel with the expectations of the Ottoman literary polysystem in the process of westernization efforts. Translation activities primarily from French novels started as a result of such an environment. In 1859, Yusuf Kamil Pasha's translation of *Télémaque* from Fénelon is regarded as the first translated novel into Turkish, which was to be followed soon, by many others. *Télémaque* was important not only for its being the first novel translation, but also for its realistic content and its recording of daily lives of the characters. The first translation displayed the force of the novel genre in a culture and society, and it took its place in the Ottoman culture as the first of its kind, as a translated novel. It was published under the name of *Tercüme-i Telemak* and the translations of *The Miseribles*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Monte Cristo* and many more enabled the development of the genre in a deep rooted manner in the Turkish Literature.

The emergence of the novel genre during the Reformation period in the Ottoman Empire brought about the need to reflect the lives of the Ottoman people, their norms and ways of thinking, and most importantly, the novel genre enabled to reflect the dual situation created by modernism efforts and the traditional way of thinking and living in the Ottoman society. Popular novel, in that framework, offered the best instrument to convey and deal with the changes in the Ottoman society in the fields of culture, social life and economy, as well as improvements in language and education. The first Ottoman-Turkish novels describe persons roughly as if drawing a caricature and the characters are not examined thoroughly; neither any solutions are offered to their dilemmas of old-new, East-West since the authors themselves were facing the same dilemmas (Yalçın-Çelik 116). Nevertheless, the emergence of the genre enabled the creation of a new phase in the literary polysystem.

Several chambers such as the Translation Chamber, Academy of Sciences, and Ottoman Scientific Society were founded to initiate literary and scientific studies as well as translations. The first literary translators who were themselves authors such as Ibrahim Sinasi and Grand Vezir Yusuf Kamil Pasha served to introduce three new literary genres such as western poetry, philosophical dialogue and the novel. Translations were mostly from French literature which offered models for imitation as well. With the introduction of new models and new genres, writers and translators began to use an unelaborated and simple language in order to communicate more easily with the reader and to create an awareness of new literary genres. Among these author-translators, Ahmet Midhat Efendi deserves attention in terms of his views and significance in the establishment of the novel genre in the Turkish literary tradition.

Ahmet Midhat (1844-1912) was an author, translator, journalist and publisher. He was born to a family of middle class merchants. His writing began in 1869 when his friends in literary circles helped him to a position at the *Tuna* newspaper. In his prolific literary output, he focused on the issues of his times, underlining the importance of novel reading as a form of entertainment. In his thinking, his novels were not regarded as “literary” and he himself was not “a literary author” either; instead, he wanted to “translate the ordinary man’s troubles to the society” since, at that time, he claimed that 99% of the population “did not have a taste for literature” (Midhat in Finn 23). He was also an Ottoman intellectual who was not actually an official and who personified an emerging Ottoman

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print capitalism. He was such a prolific author that he founded a printshop to publish his own works (Findley 20). For many years, he edited and largely wrote the newspaper *Tercüman-i Hakikat* (*Interpreter of Truth*). According to Findley, Ahmet Midhat was an unabashed popularizer and encyclopedist who often cribbed from European sources (21). Midhat met the famous Turkish painter Osman Hamdi Bey in Baghdad and through Osman Hamdi Bey he was introduced to Western literature. During the same period, Midhat also met some of the foremost religious figures of his era and he was initiated into the philosophy of the East as well. Midhat was fully fluent in French, Persian and Arabic. In order to earn a living for his family, in 1871 he decided that he would print his own books in a foot-operated printing press he had set up at his home. Midhat also used his printing press to produce various literary journals, and in a few years he became quite a proficient printer. In 1878, he started publishing *Tercüman-i Hakikat*, which eventually was to become the longest lasting newspaper in the history of the Turkish press. Translations of European novels had appeared before but Ahmed Midhat became the first Ottoman author-translator (Findley 20). His works fed a keen hunger in a society where modern print media had developed only lately and where contacts with the outside world were developing. Findley writes that Ahmed Midhat's popularity partly derived from his exuberant nature and communitarian view of society. Once dubbed a "forty-horsepower writing machine," he enjoyed a popularity comparable to Charles Dickens's or Mark Twain's (Findley 20-21).

Unlike many of his contemporary writers and journalists, Midhat self-evidently did not fully approve of direct emulation of Western values into the Ottoman society. He believed that social, economic and cultural change should be the priorities in the steps towards westernization. Sharing his opinions with other Ottoman authors of his time, he relentlessly criticized superficial westernization and exaggerations and mocked at them in his books and plays. He was a keen observer of both the Ottoman and the European cultures and he had traveled extensively to Europe which he gave an account of, in his book *A Tour in Europe*, 1889 (*Avrupa'da Bir Cevelan*). His travels took him to the main cities of Europe such as Paris and Stockholm and he was able to investigate the culture and the society of the West through his own critical eyes. As a result, he was able to detect the positive and negative aspects of both the Ottoman and the European culture which consequently enabled him to advocate change in some social aspects such as attire and gender relations, while he urged the protection of the Ottoman family life and traditional morals. In his attitude towards literature he also differed from other contemporary intellectuals who valued French literature above anything else. Instead, he believed in a synthesis of eastern and western cultures.

Ahmet Midhat is important in terms of his efforts to popularize literature, to help the popular novel flourish, and to advocate simplicity in literary language which he believed should make literature accessible to all. He produced nearly 250 works including his translations from French and his own novels. In 1870 in *Dağarcık* Journal he wrote a piece on reforming the Ottoman language. In his writing, he underlined the necessity of simplifying and cleaning the Turkish language from the invasion of Arabic and Persian vocabulary and grammar in an uncondescending manner. He believed that Turkish language should consist only of Turkish rules and norms: He writes the following on language simplification: "If the Turkish equivalent of a word or rule exists, we must not use its Arabic or Persian versions. Otherwise it will be impossible to create a simple language." (qtd. in Sevük 297) Elsewhere in his book, Sevük underlines the importance of Midhat in

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popularizing the novel genre and in his commitment to create a simple and purified Turkish language. Midhat held the following opinion about literary translation: it should be rewriting the original in the native language. In many of his prefaces to his translations, he frequently expressed his aversion for 'literal' translation because the result did not read like an original (Paker 1998).

In his preface to Paul de Kock's *La fille aux trois jupons* (Üç yüzlü karı) which he translated with Ebüzziya Tevfik in 1875, he describes his translation policy as:

> This story is not a literary translation of the author's story with the same title. Those who are familiar with the language will admit that there is no allegiance in a literary translation. We did not even translate it freely, because those who have not lived in Paris cannot appreciate the delicacy and the connotations in Paul de Kock's work. Therefore we rewrote the story in Turkish (qtd. From Özön in Berk 71).

His preference for target-text orientedness and for creating an acceptable text in Ottoman culture is also noteworthy in his efforts to popularize especially the novel genre in his own culture.

Özlem Berk, underlines the importance of Midhat in starting discussions in the fields of language and literature in the literary polysystem of the Ottomans. She mentions in her published PhD Dissertation Ahmet Midhat's views about the novel genre and concludes that Midhat believed that a national novel was to be created according to its own national aptitude, however a national novel should not be secluded from the superior elements of the century to which it belongs. Therefore he thought that the works to be translated from European literature had to be selected accordingly and he advocated freedom and alterations in translations (Berk 72).

Ahmet Midhat's own novels were modelled on works of French literature such as:

Haydut Montari from *Simon et Marie* by Xavier de Montépin,

Ne damet mi Heyhat from *L'Aventunère* by Emile Augier,

Hasan Mellâh from *Les Comte de Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas Père

In *Hasan Mellâh* (1874) which is his first novel, he wrote in his preface his motive and style in creating the novel: I wrote and produced this story entitled *Hasan Mellâh* in order to be an example in the vacuum of our national intellectual power. It is not a translation, not even an imitation. Albeit it is a depiction and compilation, my soul which always forces and directs me to the limits of my power directed me to assimilate the story of Monte Cristo in this story.

But my work would scarcely reach the level of Alexandre Dumas's work. It doesn't matter whether it reaches it or not... that which is called progress can be achieved by craving to attain to the level of those ahead as one observes them... (qtd. in and trans. by Berk 74).

İsmail Habib Sevük, a critic and man of letters in the early 20th century in his textbook *Reformation Period Literature* for High School students, makes an interesting assessment of Ahmet Midhat's translations:

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> It can easily be seen how well Namık Kemal finds equivalences in Turkish for French concepts. Since not everybody can be as talented as Namık Kemal, this "free translation" approach has been introduced by some people. Ahmet Midhat Efendi is the inventor of this approach. He is doing this not only for being less talented about translation but for two other issues as well: One is to write and translate as quickly as possible since he does not have much time to dwell on things. On the other hand, I believe that in free translation system you must read the pieces and write the meaning of them. But Midhat just writes away!...
>
> The second issue is about his shrewdness. He is in the first place addressing the people. He does not want them to feel foreign to what they read. But, under this attitude, the public holds a positive opinion about Midhat. They think that Ahmet Midhat both writes novels and translates novels from famous French authors. And all these novels are similar. So Midhat is on the same level as those famous Authors. There, you see, Ahmet Midhat, thanks to his free translation method, makes himself as famous as the French authors in the eyes of the public. Actually, those authors he translated such as Dumafis, Foyye etc. have all become like Midhat. (Sevük 297)

According to A. Hamdi Tanpınar, another prominent Turkish writer and critique, Midhat's significance as a translator and a novelist in the 19th century lies in the fact that he advocated a reform initiative in the Turkish language and made the Ottoman public interested in reading literature and take pleasure from it. Hence, Midhat in that sense, paved the way for his contemporaries as well as for the coming generations for getting involved in literature and creating an awareness around new genres such as the novel.

As in the 19th century Ottoman Empire, author-translators in the first 3-4 decades of the 20th century were very instrumental in initiating the cultural reforms which supported the westernization and modernization project of the newly found Turkish Republic (1923). In 1939, a Translation Bureau was formed to reinforce the new language policies (such as adopting the Latin alphabet in 1928) and to organize a program for cultural revival. The Bureau comprised men of letters, university teachers, authors, poets and translators. They were assigned with the task of selecting and translating world classics from both western and eastern sources, beginning with Ancient Greek philosophy and literature which inspired the Renaissance and Enlightenment in the West, and founded the universal values and contemporary civilization. The general aim of the Bureau set up by the new Turkish State was "to generate" the spirit of humanism by cultivating and assimilating foreign literatures through translation which would, it was felt, bring about a renaissance and contribute to the development of the Turkish language and culture. By 1967, more than 1,000 translations were produced from mainly Western sources, including some Eastern sources as well (Paker 579-80).

Among the author-translators who took part in this initiative, Nurullah Ataç can be mentioned as one of the most influential and significant person. In the first place he was the first director of the Translation Bureau and the most productive translator, essayist and critic in the 1940's and 1950's.

Ataç was born on August 21, 1898 in İstanbul. He went to Galatasaray Lycee and then to Switzerland where he was educated in French. He became a French language teacher and worked in many of the prominent high schools and universities. He became the official

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translator of the Republic of Turkey from 1951 until his death in 1957. Ataç's interest in literature began with his involvement in the literary journal Dergâh, published by Yahya Kemal, the major literary figure of the period. Coming to the self-reached conclusion that he would not become a leading literary figure, he began to focus on writing essays and criticism.

Ataç's attempts to write poetry and dramatic plays failed, and it was his critical pieces that made him famous. In his critical pieces, Ataç used a highly subjective, one-sided viewpoint, and he interpreted the works solely through his personal taste. Nonetheless, he still had a tremendous impact on the development of Turkish literature, and attracted attention to critical writing and to the arts of translation and criticism. In fact, his irritable attitude resulted in the birth of translation and literary criticism in the Turkish literature.

Ataç published in most of the significant national journals, including the one published by the Bureau. His overall opinion was that Turkish literature needed to become more western, and should be on the side of reason. He frequently criticized flowery and exaggerated works, and he advocated pureness, simplicity and clarity of the Turkish language. He stressed that language used in literary works should be the same as spoken Turkish, and that this would bridge the communication breakdown that existed among the various classes of society. As a translator, he produced around fifty translations mainly from Greek, Latin, French, and Russian classics.

Ataç regarded language as a matter of civilization. His advocation for simplification and purification of Turkish language sometimes led to being criticized by his contemporaries. Ataç did not use foreign or borrowed vocabulary in his style and believed that there was a direct relation between thought and language. In order to create the tradition of concrete thinking in Turkish culture, he emphasized the importance of finding transparent and comprehensible equivalents of concepts and ideas. This, according to him, necessitates turkification of these words belonging to concepts and ideas in Latin, Greek, Persian and Arabic.

> When they say a made up language, they think they have a point. Let me tell you, among those who say ‘made up’ (or ‘neologism’) I don’t know a man who knows what he is talking about. Yes, we will make up words, and those made up words will become a part of people’s language, like the Arabic or Persian words in the past. They will replace those. (Ataç 1952)

His views on translation which also contributed to the forming of translation norms for the Translation Bureau were mainly based on the use of a pure and simple Turkish in an effort to domesticate the translations of Western sources. In that respect, both Midhat in the 19th century Ottoman Empire and Ataç in the 20th century, Turkish Republic shared similar views on translation in their respective literary polysystem and cultural environments.

In his article “On Translation” (Tercümeye dair) he puts forward his views as such:

> Someone who is translating a book into Turkish, must, above all, focus on the necessities and requirements of Turkish and follow them, before focusing on the ideas in the book. If he forces the language, he becomes incomprehensible, hence, will not be loyal to the original work. (Ataç 15 my translation)

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Ataç believes that our greatest expectation from translation is to prove that Turkish is capable of expressing things thought in other languages. (Ataç 15)

Ataç's tendency for domestication in literary translation is closely linked with his conception of the function of translation. He believes that a work of art should function as a work of art in the target culture in order to enrich the target culture with its style and modes of expression, as well as with its intellectual content. He writes the following with respect to his views:

> While translating, we have to search for the meaning of the whole sentence, not only the words in it. Words do not convey us what the author says; the whole that is formed by the words conveys the real meaning and the intention of the author. Hence in translation it is in vain to commit oneself to the words only: we must concentrate on the intention and try to express it as fluently as it appears in its own language. (Ataç 27)

These two figures, Midhat and Ataç, in the Turkish literary tradition, acting both as author- translators, have two important things in common. One is they both lived during the periods when translation activities accelerated in line with westernization and development efforts; they both believed that literary enrichment could be possible through the translation of western models. Second is enrichment of the Turkish language, which meant simplification and finding a literary style close to the language spoken by the public. Hence, this would eventually create a reading public and an interest in literature in order to revitalize Turkish authors and men of letters to create works of art of Western quality. As exemplified in Midhat and Ataç, we may as well say that in a cycle of tradition beginning from the Ottomans, modern Turkish literature was enriched by and benefited greatly from the activities of author-translators.

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