

CHAPTER 10

## Muslim Culture, Reform and Patriotism: Staging Namık Kemal in Post-Ottoman Bulgaria (1878-1908)

Milena B. Methodieva

Namık Kemal

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In one of the scenes of what has become the most celebrated Ottoman play, Namık Kemal's *Vatan Yahud Silistre* (The Fatherland or Silistra) written in 1872, the protagonist İslam Bey delivers an inspiring speech to a group of volunteers he is leading in the defense of the key strategic fortress against the enemy advance:

Friends! We will go the length of the Danube. The Danube is our spring of life. If the Danube is gone, the fatherland cannot live; if the fatherland does not live, no man can live in the fatherland.... May be there will be someone alive.... Yes! May be there will be someone. (Then with great anger) No, no. There will be someone alive, but this will not be a man. If a man sees the fatherland trampled he cannot live. If a man sees trampled the one who has nurtured and raised him he cannot live. The person who sees trampled the one who has nurtured and raised him and still lives, is lower than a dog. Brothers! Man is not lower than a dog! .... There is a God greater than man! God commands love for the fatherland. Our fatherland means the Danube. Because if the Danube goes, there is no fatherland. Wherever you dig on the banks of the Danube, a bone of your father or brother will be found. The land washed by the ripples of the Danube water is made up of the remnants of those who died fighting to protect it. Since the time when the name Ottoman was heard, the Danube was crossed several times, many times. But it was never conquered. While the Ottomans stand, it will not be taken once; if the Ottomans know what Ottoman patriotism is, it will never be taken. Are you ready to die for the fatherland?<sup>1</sup>

This passage is noteworthy not only because it exudes fervent Ottoman patriotism, a concept by which the play and its author have since come to be

1 Namık Kemal, *Vatan Yahud Silistre*, 7th print (Def'a-i Sab'i) (n.p.: n.p., 1308/1889-90), pp. 37-39, translation by author.

identified, but also because it underscores the significance of the Danube and the lands around it as an important place in the Ottoman patriotic imagination. In it the future of the fatherland is closely connected with the fate of the Danube. But even if the passage warns of the dangers looming over the Ottoman state with the loss of the Danube, it has the air of an uplifting prophecy aiming to inspire and reassure not only the characters of the play but also its audiences. Although danger was imminent, it would be overcome again. This was not complacency but a confidence in the future of the Ottoman state. These words perhaps reflected contemporaneous sentiments. In 1872-73, when the play was written and staged, in spite of the internal challenges the Ottoman state faced, few could imagine the permanent loss of the area around the Danube. At the time the lands south of the river made up the Danube *vilayet*, the Ottoman province where the Tanzimat reforms had scored the most remarkable successes. The Ottoman authorities had introduced there more regular administration in which they sought to address Christian grievances. Defenses were sound after the fortification of several fortresses, among them Silistra. The permanent loss of the area did not seem a realistic danger.

Six years after the play was written, however, events had taken such a turn that the inconceivable had come true. The former Danube province, along with the cherished banks of the Danube, had become part of the newly-established Bulgarian state. The play also experienced its share of vicissitudes. As Namık Kemal fell out of favor with the Hamidian regime so, too, did his works which reemerged prominently on Ottoman stages only after the Young Turk Revolution. But, in comparison, during the time of their eclipse in the Ottoman empire, the plays of Namık Kemal came to enjoy substantial popularity in Bulgaria among the local Muslims; indeed, many of them were introduced to modern theater through these works. What was the meaning and purpose of Namık Kemal's plays for Bulgaria's Muslims? What were their responses to these performances? And what was the role of theater in their communal life?

Along with addressing these questions this chapter aims to shed light on some aspects of the history of the Muslims in Bulgaria during the first decades of Bulgaria's existence. Most significantly, it challenges the common assumptions which portray the Muslim community as a conservative inert mass uninterested in any cultural endeavors by providing an insight into the activity of a locally grown Muslim movement for cultural reform and political mobilization. Theater was one aspect of its activities.

Western-style theater began gaining popularity in the Ottoman empire following the introduction of the Tanzimat. In addition to various European troupes the 1840s saw the appearance of the first professional Ottoman companies. The Naum Theater, the first lasting institution, opened its doors in

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Namık Kemal 140116

DATE OF BIRTH 21 December 1840  
PLACE OF BIRTH Tekirdağ (modern Turkey)  
DATE OF DEATH 2 December 1888  
PLACE OF DEATH Chios (modern Greece)  
*by-Michelangelo Guida*  
BIOGRAPHY

Namık Kemal was an Ottoman poet and political essayist, and a key member of the Young Ottomans. His ideas were highly influential in the spread of pan-Islamism, Islamism (understood at the time as the ideology that seeks to create a political order defined in terms of Islam), conservatism, and Turkish nationalism. His father, Mustafa Âsım, was a chief astrologer in the sultan's court. After the death of his mother, he spent most of his youth with his grandfather, Abdülatif Pasha, a tax collector, and followed him in his various appointments throughout the empire. Kemal received his education in literature, logic, Arabic and Persian from tutors in Istanbul, Kars and Sofia. During his stay in Sofia, he wrote poetry and got to know the Mevlevi Sufi order.

From 1857 to March 1867, Namık Kemal worked in the Ottoman capital's Customs Translation Office, and later in the Translation Office of the Sublime Porte. There, he learned French and became acquainted with French works. In 1862, he met Şinâsi, an influential poet, political activist and editor of the journal *Tasvîr-i Efkâr* ('Herald of ideas'). It was with this journal that Namık Kemal started his career as a columnist.

As a journalist, Kemal translated authors such as Montesquieu, who was very influential on him. After the publication of the Young Ottomans' manifesto, he was sent by the sultan to Erzurum as assistant to the provincial governor in order to keep him away from the capital. On 17 May 1867, however, he fled to Paris where the Ottoman opposition movement was recruiting people to its cause. In 1869, he returned to Istanbul, where he continued his publishing activities and, in 1872, he established the intellectual newspaper *İbret* ('Admonition').

Between 1872 and 1873, Kemal published two biographies of Ottoman sultans, Mehmed II (r. 1444-6, 1451-81) and Selim I (r. 1512-20), and also of the Mongol Emir Nawruz (r. 1284-9), who contributed to the Islamisation of the Turks, and Şalâh al-Dîn (r. 1174-93), who defeated the crusaders.

122-126