

**“THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE WHATSOEVER  
BETWEEN FAMILY AND NATIONALITY”:  
IMAGINING THE NATION AS A FAMILY IN ÖMER  
SEYFETTİN’S STORIES\***

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**Abstract**

This essay examines three stories by “the father of Turkish short story writing” Ömer Seyfettin (1884-1920): *Primo Türk Çocuğu*, *Fon Sadriştayn’ın Karısı*, *Fon Sadriştayn’ın Oğlu*; and *Ashab-ı Kehfimiz*. Following a contextualization of Ömer Seyfettin’s life and works in the broader turbulent political and historical context of the late Ottoman Empire, this essay suggests that for Ömer Seyfettin a successful nation is based on a successful family. In other words, between the lines of these stories is found the idea that in both a real and metaphorical sense, the concept of family is used to “imagine the nation.” To achieve a complete family consisting of happy parents and children and thus a nation, the stories suggest, linguistic and cultural homogeneity is necessary. Yet this precondition might not always be sufficient for the complete realization of family and nation.

**Keywords:** Ömer Seyfettin, story, family, nation, nationalism.

**Öz**

**“Aile ile Milliyet Arasında hiç, hiçbir fark yok”:  
Ömer Seyfettin’in Öykülerinde Ulusun Aile Olarak Tahayyülü**

Bu çalışma “Türk kısa öykücülüğünün atası” Ömer Seyfettin’in (1884-1920) üç öyküsünü incelemektedir: *Primo Türk Çocuğu*, *Fon Sadriştayn’ın Karısı*, *Fon Sadriştayn’ın Oğlu* ve *Ashab-ı Kehfimiz*. Ömer Seyfettin’in, geç Osmanlı

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dönemine tekabül eden hayat hikâyesinin ve çalışmalarının, bu çalkantılı siyasal ve tarihsel dönem çerçevesinde bağlamsallaştırılmasını müteakiben bu çalışma Ömer Seyfettin için ulusun aileye dayanmakta olduğu gözleminin altını çizecektir. Bir başka deyişle, bahsi geçen üç öykünün satır aralarında hem gerçek hem de sembolik anlamda aile kavramına ulusu “tahayyül etme” işlevi atfedildiğine işaret edilecektir. Bu hikâyelere göre, mutlu anne, baba ve çocuklardan oluşan kâmil bir aile ve dolayısıyla ulusun olması dilsel ve kültürel türdeşlikten geçmektedir. Ancak bu önşart ailenin ve ulusun her zaman başarılı bir şekilde tezahür etmesi için yeterli olmayabilir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Ömer Seyfettin, öykü, aile, ulus, milliyetçilik.

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I attempt to demonstrate the way in which the nation is imagined in Ömer Seyfettin’s stories. Through a reading of three of his stories—namely, *Primo Türk Çocuğu 1*, *Primo Türk Çocuğu 2*; *Fon Sadriştayn’ın Karısı*, *Fon Sadriştayn’ın Oğlu*; and *Ashab-ı Kehfimiz*—one can see that the nation is imagined as a family. Although my main focus is these three stories, I will sometimes also refer to other stories which bear traces of this argument. An analysis of these stories however makes it clear that the family and thus the project of constructing a nation are not equally successful. Here the meaning of success is as follows: at the micro level of the family it is a happy, harmonious and complete collectivity of father, mother and children. For instance, there is no divorce or run away child, nor is there any problem among family members. For Ömer Seyfettin however the answer to the question of what makes a family a family is also the answer to the question of what makes a nation a nation. As such, at a macro social and political level, the successful family symbolizes the harmonious and integrated nation whose fundamental characteristic is the linguistic and cultural homogeneity of its members. Therefore, as the following analysis displays, the most fundamental factor leading to a successful family, and hence, a successful nation, is linguistic and cultural homogeneity, which is a necessary but *not always sufficient* condition. Additionally, imagining the nation as a family goes hand in hand with a critique of the idea or ideology of Ottomanism, which is seen as invalid and contrary to changing social and political reality.

This paper is composed of two parts. In the first part, I examine the broader political and historical context within which Ömer Seyfettin lived and wrote his stories. I therefore concentrate on the journal *Genç Kalemler*, which Ömer Seyfettin and his friend Ali Canip published. This section focuses on Ömer Seyfettin’s life, works and his theory and practice about the language issue that was embodied in *Genç Kalemler*.

The second part of the paper consists of three sections. In the first section, following the depiction of the helpful use of the last edition of Ömer Seyfettin’s stories, I briefly focus on whether it is possible to distinguish between the periods of Ömer Seyfettin’s writing. In the second section, I examine S. Şerifsoy’s analysis focusing on the institutional and metaphorical use of the family in the Kemalist modernization project. Moreover, I briefly refer to F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis’ discussion on the ways in which women are used in national(ist) projects and processes. I argue that Ömer Seyfettin’s “imagining the nation”<sup>1</sup> as a family follows the lines of observations made in these two studies to an important degree. The third section is devoted to an analysis of the stories under consideration.

## 1. CONTEXTUALIZING ÖMER SEYFETTİN’S LIFE AND WORKS

It does not seem possible to understand Ömer Seyfettin’s works in general and to appreciate the focus of this paper in particular without considering the larger political, literary and historical context in which Ömer Seyfettin lived. Therefore, it is necessary to take a closer look at his biography based on various sources (Alangu, 1968; Dizdaroğlu, 1964; Öner, 1971; Kocatürk, 1964; Banarlı, 1948: 353-355).

Ömer Seyfettin was born in Gönen, Balıkesir in 1884. His father was a military man and he wanted his son to become a soldier. He therefore sent him to *Eyüp Baytar Rüştiyesi*. Afterwards, Ömer Seyfettin went to *Edirne Askeri İdadisi* and then attended *Harb Okulu* and graduated in 1903. After graduation, he served in the military in İzmir and in a military school as a teacher. From 1908 until 1910, Ömer Seyfettin served in Salonica and at the borders of Macedonia. As Dizdaroğlu (1964: 8) and Öner (1971: 13) note, Ömer Seyfettin’s service at the Balkan borders had an impact on the development of his personality and worldview since he witnessed nationalist movements amongst Balkan nations. In 1910, he left the military and went to Salonica in order to engage in literary activities, which he had had a predilection for. Indeed, while Ömer Seyfettin was serving in the military, he was already writing and publishing poems and articles in various papers. His serious literary activities, however, started after he went to Salonica. With his friend Ali Canip, he published the journal *Genç Kalemler* in 1911. Soon afterwards, however, he was called to the army due to the outbreak of the Balkan War in 1912. Ömer Seyfettin was imprisoned by the Greeks between 1912 and 1913. After he was released, he went to İstanbul. There, he became a teacher of literature at a high school. In 1915, he got married with Calibe Hanım who was the daughter of one of the leading figures of the Committee of Union and Progress –namely, Besim

Ethem Bey. They had a daughter called Güner. However, they were divorced in 1918. Hülya Argunşah (1999: 11) notes that Calibe Hanım was involved in the social life of society [*sosyete*] and they were distant personalities in an intellectual and spiritual sense.<sup>2</sup> Ömer Seyfettin died in 1920 at the age of 36.

Although Ömer Seyfettin died young, with his realist stories he occupies a very important place in the history of Turkish literature. Ömer Seyfettin has been called “the de Maupassant of Turkish literature” (Kocatürk, 1964: 765). Other scholars also call him “the father of Turkish short story writing” (Köroğlu, 2010: 355). It should be noted that Ömer Seyfettin also wrote poems and plays, but he is most successful and well-known for his short stories (Banarlı, 1948: 355). One can see that the social and political events of his times are reflected in his stories. Indeed this becomes most understandable when one remembers the fact that Ömer Seyfettin’s lifetime corresponds to the hardest times of the “sick man of Europe.” The proclamation of the Second Meşrutiyet in 1908, the coming to power of the Young Turks, the Balkan Wars, the invasion of Tripoli by the Italians, and World War I, were all vital political events of the late Ottoman Empire that shaped the social and political life of the period in which he lived.

If one important characteristic of his works is the reflection of social and political events of the time, the most revolutionary one, however, seems to be the fact that he wrote with a simple language. Indeed, the simplification of the literary language was the primary aim of his journal *Genç Kalemler*. As Masami Arai (1992: 34) points out, Ömer Seyfettin and his friend Ali Canip used *Genç Kalemler* as a means to show the theory and practice of the “new language” [*yeni lisan*]. But what exactly was their aim in this theory and practice of the “new language”? Arai (1992: 34) gives a succinct outline derived from Ali Canip’s summary of the reforms needed to create the new language:

Arabic and Persian compound words and plurals should not be used, except for technical terms and plurals used as singulars; e.g. *ahlâk, kâinât, sadriâzam*.

Arabic and Persian particles should not be used, except for words taken root as colloquial expressions; e.g. *amma, şâyet, yâni, lâkin*.

Orthographies of Arabic and Persian words should follow their original styles, for the present. However, those words whose pronunciations had altered to the Turkish styles in the common language should be written in these Turkish styles; e.g. *kalabalık, hoca*.

Arabic and Persian words which had equivalents in Turkish should not be used; e.g. *güneş* for *şems* and *mihir*, *ay* for *kamer* and *mah*.

The written language should be based on Turkish simple grammar.

The spoken language in Istanbul should be the example for both verse and prose.

As can be seen, the purpose behind the publication of *Genç Kalemler* was to simplify and purify the language. One should also note that alongside this project was an accompanying criticism raised against the *Tanzimat* literature and the “New Literature” [*Edebiyat-ı Cedide*] which were far from portraying real people and were imitative of the Western literature (Arai, 1992: 25). The significant figures of the “New Literature” were Tevfik Fikret, Halit Ziya, Cenap Şehabeddin and Hüseyin Cahit. As David Kushner (1977: 82) points out, these writers were grouped around the magazine *Servet-i Fünun* between 1896 and 1901 under the editorship of Tevfik Fikret and:

They were strongly influenced by the contemporary literary school of symbolism, and selecting their themes primarily from the life of the upper, urban classes, wrote in an intricate, flowery and image-laden style.

Having briefly examined Ömer Seyfettin’s life and the literary current he was involved in, I would like to present the intellectual debates of the period. As Niyazi Berkes (1964) shows, there were three schools of thought at the time; namely, the Westernist, the Islamist and the Turkist. The division and differentiation between the three became obvious between 1908 and 1918 (Berkes, 1964). The two prominent figures of the Westernist school were Tevfik Fikret and Abdullah Cevdet. The important Islamist figures were Said Nursi, Mehmet Akif and Mustafa Sabri. And the significant Turkists were Yusuf Akçura, Ahmed Ağaoğlu, Ziya Gökalp and Hüseyinzade Ali. From a review of the literature of the period, Berkes (1964: 347) observes that four issues were predominantly discussed:

1) The quest for a revolutionary change; 2) the causes of the Turkish, or Muslim decline; 3) Western civilization and the scope for Westernization in the reforms; 4) the reform of the institutions of state, religion, family, economy, education and the complex of language, script, literature and art.

According to Berkes, the position of these schools on these issues can be summarized as follows: while the Westernists were in favor of the wholesale adoption of the Western civilization with its “rose” and “thorn,” the Islamists opposed them. The Turkists, on the other hand, were somewhere between the two. As Berkes (1964: 338) notes:

...the Westernists were the thesis against which the Islamists constituted the always violent antithesis, and the clash of the two helped the development of the Turkist position as an alternative.

While the adoption of Western civilization occupied the central place in the Westernist school, the main motivation for the Islamists was the good of the *ummah*, whereas it was the nation for the Turkists.

## 2. IMAGINING THE NATION AS A FAMILY IN ÖMER SEYFETTİN'S STORIES

Before going into an analysis of Ömer Seyfettin stories, three important points need to be underlined. The first one is about the edition of his stories upon which this paper is based. The recent edition of his stories was made by Hülya Arğunşah in a total of seven volumes; four of them including all his stories. This edition seems reliable compared to earlier editions as it is the transliteration of the stories from their original sources (Argunşah, 1999: 11). The organization of the stories is also quite helpful. At the end of each story, Arğunşah indicates the original source and year of the appearance of each story. Another important point is that Arğunşah has done a great job by putting all the stories in their chronological order of publication. Such an organization makes it easy for the reader to have an idea about the development of the writing style of Ömer Seyfettin as well as the immediate relation between stories and broader historical developments.

The second point is about distinguishing between periods of Ömer Seyfettin's writings. The most conspicuous point in this regard is that compared to the stories published from 1911 onwards, one can see more Arabic and Persian compounds in earlier stories. In this sense, one can count the following stories that have frequent uses of Arabic and Persian words and compound words: *Sahir'e Karşı*, *İki Mebus*, *Busenin Şekl-i İptidaîsi* and *Beşeriyet ve Köpek*, published in 1905, 1908, 1909 and 1910, respectively. Indeed these stories are not many, only a total of 18. It seems that especially starting with 1911, i.e. the year of the publication of *Genç Kalemler*, one can view the full realization of the "new language," that is, the vocabulary that is used is much more simple. The first story to be written in the "new language" seems to be *Bahar ve Kelebekler*, published in *Genç Kalemler* on April 11, 1911, with which one can see a shift towards a simpler language. Indeed preceding the title of the story, there is a note saying "in the new language" [*yeni lisanla*]. One can also see this note preceding the titles of other stories published in 1911; namely, *Pamuk İpliği*, *Bomba* and *Primo Türk Çocuğu*. One cannot see this note in any of the stories which came out afterwards. Also the language used in later stories is the precise realization of the theory of the new language that was put forward in *Genç Kalemler*. Thus, it seems that the publication of *Genç Kalemler* had an immediate and long-lasting impact on the linguistic style that Ömer Seyfettin preferred.

The third point is as follows: the crux of the argument suggested in this paper is that the nation is imagined as a family in Ömer Seyfettin’s stories. More importantly, this paper claims that the most tenable reason leading Ömer Seyfettin to such an imagining seems to have been the concern to find the answer to the question of how to survive as a nation in the middle of turbulent social and political circumstances. Having such a fundamental observation in mind, I would like to note that this is by no means the only way to read Ömer Seyfettin’s stories. Indeed it is quite possible for one to come up with many different readings regarding the construction of national belonging in Ömer Seyfettin’s stories (e.g. Koroğlu, 2010). Moreover, there have been several important observations regarding the use of family in national(ist) projects and processes in general and the roles attributed to women in particular.

For the purposes of this paper, the most fruitful examination of the role attributed to family in nationalism in the Turkish context, albeit later than Ömer Seyfettin’s times, is provided by Selda Şerifsoy (2000). Şerifsoy in her piece about the meaning, role and significance attributed to family in the Kemalist modernization project, displays how Kemalist modernizing elites made use of family in *both* institutional and metaphorical senses, in order to justify, spread and engrain Republican nationalist ideals at the social level. In order to do this, Şerifsoy examines textbooks, documents and journals that are taught and/or circulated at three institutions which were the most effective institutions of political socialization: school, army and People’s Houses (2000: 155-156). In this sense, she presents a discourse analysis of the textbooks taught at public primary and secondary schools, in classes such as *Aile Bilgisi* and *Yurt Bilgisi*. Şerifsoy arrives at noteworthy observations about the prevailing narrative regarding the approach to family. She notes that:

In this narrative, the family does not occupy a place as a value or a purpose on its own: neither to establish a house [*yuva*], nor to have children, nor the sharing of the life by two people loving each other has a value; to the extent that it is taken independently of the context of “service for the homeland.” The family is presented as a necessary space in order to carry out national duties. The *only* way to exist in social life is leant on being a member of a family. In conclusion, since family life is defined as the condition for one’s continuing his/her life, the choice of this way and the acceptance of all characteristics/features in it are qualified as a “natural” behavior (Şerifsoy, 2000: 185).

How, however, is the order of things imagined in this “naturalized” family? Şerifsoy (2000: 185) responds to this question in the following:

First of all, the hierarchical structure, which is determined on the basis of criteria of gender and the old-the young, is adopted: According to

this understanding, in power relations within family, parents represent “the state,” children [on the other hand, represent] the people. The hierarchy based on gender, on the other hand, makes itself clear in the division of labor between parents, which is defined by father’s *presidency* in taking ultimate decisions, and by mother’s *prime ministry* in being the person in charge of implementing the decisions that are taken.

Furthermore, Şerifsoy (2000: 185) points to another important consequence and/or expectation that this “natural” family leads to:

In socialization, one is taught that whatever s/he does for his/her family, s/he cannot pay back its rights on himself/herself. Therefore, because of this debt that is unable to be paid [*kapanmayan borç hanesi*], to expect lifelong service from someone is the *legitimate* right of the family. By means of the discourse “The nation is a family,” even “The nation is our genuine family,” this legitimate demand of right is moved from the social platform to the political platform and “the citizen’s giving away his/her life for his/her nation” is received as natural.

Şerifsoy’s observations seem significant. It seems particularly possible to observe the convergence of both institutional and metaphorical uses of the concept of family at the service of nation in Ömer Seyfettin’s stories to a significant extent. Put bluntly, the stories under consideration seem to well exemplify Şerifsoy’s observations.

In addition to Şerifsoy’s piece, F. Anthias and N. Yuval-Davis’ observations regarding various ways in which women are assigned certain roles in the realization of nationalist goals also seem quite helpful as analytical tools in this paper. Anthias and Yuval-Davis (1989: 8-10) point out that women are both symbolically and practically used in five ways in national/ethnic projects and processes:

- 1) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities,
- 2) as reproducers of the boundaries of ethnic/national groups,
- 3) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture,
- 4) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences, and
- 5) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

In the following analysis of Ömer Seyfettin’s stories we will see that women are seen or defined on the basis of these ways to varying degrees.



Having examined the political, literary and historical context of Ömer Seyfettin’s life and works as well as the concept of family in an analysis of national(ist) projects and processes, let me now turn to the first story that I will analyze, i.e. *Primo Türk Çocuğu*. This story was published in two sequences, in 1911 and 1914, respectively (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999a: 165-188, 264-288). It is a story about the awakening of a “degenerate” Turkish engineer, Kenan, to his national identity. Kenan received his education in Europe and he is married to an Italian woman by the name of Grazya. They have a child called Primo. Kenan always believed in the superiority of the West and he has always looked down on and hated his own Turkish culture and identity. However, with the Italian invasion of Tripoli he experiences an awakening shift to his own cultural and national identity. He realizes that modern Western ideals such as equality, freedom and humanism are not the true face of the West. With such a change in terms of worldview, Kenan and Grazya have to reach an agreement. Kenan asks Grazya to become a Turk, just like himself. Grazya, on the other hand, is surprised at the change Kenan underwent and she still thinks that Turks are barbaric people. Therefore, they get a divorce and Grazya returns to Italy. Primo, too, becomes a Turk like his father. He finds out that he is also a Turk thanks to his Turkish friend Orhan at school.

As Hülya Argunşah (1999a: 9) indicates, this story is like an article in which, similar to *Fon Sadriştayn’ın Karısı*, Ömer Seyfettin openly propagates his ideas in order to indoctrinate people by means of literature. The question coming to the fore here is how he does this. The father and his son awaken to their “genuine” language, culture and identity. What awakes them are the social and political circumstances prevailing in the country. The reason behind the problems that their country experiences is the insincere and double-faced Westerners. They therefore should get rid of them. In the distinct world of nations there seems to be no room for the living together of different nations under the same roof. That is why, following Grazya’s departure, “ethnic/national” purification of the house continues with the change of their Greek [*Rum*] servants with Emine Hanım, who cooks nice alaturka food for Kenan and his son Oğuz, i.e. Primo’s new Turkish name which is also “the name of the first Turkish Khan in history.”

One might raise the following question: the role that Grazya plays in this story is not in line with what Yuval-Davis observes. That is to say, Grazya is not the biological and cultural reproducer of the nation. One could respond to this question as follows. Although Grazya seemingly plays the role of mother, the role attributed to her is not that of an ideal mother. Rather, Grazya serves another purpose: she is the weak and coward symbol of imperialist powers trying to invade the fatherland and in the end, she returns to her home. In other words, other gender ideologies are at work in this story. The Turks are the father

and the son, the courageous men unlike their weak and cowardly enemies, i.e. the Westerners, who are symbolized in the figure of Grazya, i.e. the woman. The following quotation shows this point well:

Grazya was crying like the weak, sick and wretched West in the symbol of a coward and a woman, which would be crushed under the absolute victory of victorious, strong, young and awake Turan (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999a: 188).<sup>3</sup>

The second story that I analyze is *Fon Sadriştayn'ın Karısı*, first published on January 3, 1918 (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 191-202). In this story Fon Sadriştayn<sup>4</sup> first marries a very beautiful Turkish woman who speaks French and plays the piano (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 195). Fon Sadriştayn, however, had been living with his paternal aunt, who had brought him up after his parents' death early in his childhood. Soon after all three start to live together, it becomes clear that his aunt and wife cannot get along with each other. His wife tells him that his aunt wants to make her do housework, but she says that "she is not a servant" (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 195-196). At first, by using the house he inherited from his mother as collateral, he is able to rent another house to make his wife happy but he cannot afford to meet all the expenses of the servants they have as well as his wife's luxurious and irresponsible expenses. That is why he ends up selling the house he had inherited. Meanwhile, because of his disappointment and worries, he gets sicker and the money he had gradually comes to an end. Therefore, upon the advice of a friend, he uses the last portion of his money to go to Germany in order to get better. Later on, after divorcing his Turkish wife, he marries a German woman. Then, they return to Turkey. Unlike his previous Turkish wife, Fon Sadriştayn's German wife is pictured as overly diligent and hardworking in a kind of humorous way. Unlike the Turkish wife, she is very economical. Therefore, Fon Sadriştayn recovers and becomes very healthy. They save a lot of money and they are poor no longer.

İnci Enginün (1984: 61-62) notes that this story caused a lot of criticism of Ömer Seyfettin by both Germans and Turkish women. While Germans claimed that he was looking down on Germans, Turkish women said that it was an insult for Turkish women. Reporting from Ali Canib, Enginün (1984) notes that Ömer Seyfettin responds to these criticism in the continuation of this story called *Fon Sadriştayn'ın Oğlu*, first published on January 31, 1918 (1999b: 238-251). In this story, Ömer Seyfettin pictures the lives of Fon Sadriştayn and his wife after twenty five years. They are illustrated as unhealthy in their old age. They are upset about their son, Hasip who took all the money that his parents had saved for their future and ran away to America. Moreover, Fon Sadriştayn is not happy because his German wife does not care about the national culture

of the country. For instance, Fon Sadriştayn is very excited about celebrations going on outside and asks Lida to go out and see them. Yet she does not even know what these celebrations are for. Upon Fon Sadriştayn’s insistence on going out, she says that that great day and celebrations are none of her business and that they are not her “great day” but Fon Sadriştayn’s and his nation’s (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 239-240). Thus, Fon Sadriştayn feels disappointed.

In the meantime, the public celebrations that are going on that day are for the birthday of a national poet, namely Orhan Bey. The day has been declared as a national festival. Fon Sadriştayn reads about Orhan Bey’s life in papers. One of the newspapers praises Orhan Bey in the following manner:

You are our creator! Before you, the Turkish nation would not know one another. Hayve, Buhara, Semerkant, Kaşgar, Kafkasya, Azerbaycan, Anatolia did not use to understand the language of İstanbul. Even the ones living in İstanbul would not hear the literature of their own country. Before you, poets, literary men would insult their nation as “avam” (common people), they would hide all their feelings from them [*avam*] (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 243).

In another paper, Fon Sadriştayn reads the words of Orhan in an interview:

I learnt everything from my mother. My mother brought me up within a religious spirituality [*vecd*]. The source of “lyricism” that you hear in my poetry is the excitements of the religious training that I received from her. Firstly, I heard my poetry, stories, and tragedies in the form of tales from her. Her spirit, which is from the people, gave [*nefhetti*] me affection for the people, love of people. That is why my rhymes are the phrases of people and my music is the harmony in the language of people (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 244).

After reading these lines, Fon Sadriştayn thinks very highly of Orhan’s mother. Then he remembers his own son, who is the same age as Orhan. He is lazy and he has a very bad character. Even when he was a little child, he began to play games with his parents. For instance, while he was with his father he said that he was Turkish but when he was with his mother he said he was not Turkish, he was German. In this way, he would deceive his parents and he would in turn use the love they had for him, against one another. Thus, he would try to make them dislike each other. On the other hand, Orhan Bey is a great national poet. People would come to see and greet him from all over Turan. An important piece of information about Orhan is also the fact that his father died in the War in Çanakkale when Orhan was one year old (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 245).

Upset and disappointed, Fon Sadriştayn decides to go to the great woman who gave birth to such a genius as Orhan. He goes and finds out that she is his ex-wife. At this point, one can see that Ömer Seyfettin is really apologizing to Turkish women. Surprised at the fact that she is his ex-wife, Fon Sadriştayn asks her to forgive him. The dialogue at this point is worth quoting:

Orhan's mother asked like a compassionate angle addressing the sinful from a very high universe:

-Time erases every sorrow, Mr. Sadrettin, do not worry, I am no longer angry with you, so that I could forgive you. Twenty five years... But, OK, you divorced me, took a German woman upon me, anyway... But why did you slander me? You knew that I am very chaste. Why did you tell that slander to a chatterbox novelist and have him write. Here this bruise still aches in me.

-I...did not...say!

-Then, as if his exaggerations are not enough, why did you not say that for his own pleasure what he slandered me was a "lie"?

Fon Sadriştayn was suffocating from agitation [*heyecan*]:

-Forgive him too (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 250)!

Several points can be made about this story. First of all, the situation seems a little less dramatic than the previous story. In *Primo*, there was a complete break up of the family because of national tensions. In this story, there is not such a tension. Yet this is not the ideal case, either. The marriage with a non-Turkish woman can be economically very advantageous but the family is not merely about saving money or living in wealthy and healthy conditions. The family is, and perhaps more importantly, about getting excited by the same national and/or cultural festivals. Moreover, the family is also about raising good children who will not deceive their parents and who will work for the good of their nation and culture. Despite its relatively good start, one can see that in *Fon Sadriştayn*, too, like in *Primo*, there is a failure: the family is not a full family. This time the child is missing.<sup>5</sup> At this point one should also add that imagining the nation as a family is not solely for the sake of a metaphor, but it is also, as these stories show, viewed as the very basic building blocks of the nation.

One important question here is as follows: why did Fon Sadriştayn's family fail? Although the family did not have the fundamental principle, i.e. the

linguistic and cultural homogeneity, still it was not as problematic as the family in *Primo*. Moreover, as Fon Sadriştayn indicates, both he and his wife are not, after all bad people. They are serious, calm, hardworking and altruistic (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999b: 245). Then, why did they have such a bad son? In response to this question one can argue that Fon Sadriştayn and Lida were overly concerned with saving money and calculating how to make their living. Although they were not bad people, they were not successful enough in teaching their son his culture and identity. Their son turned out to be like his parents in a corrupt manner: that is to say, both his parents and he are calculating people. Moreover, one should stress that the reason why Fon Sadriştayn’s family failed can also be understood why Orhan’s family succeeded: his father lost his life for his homeland and his mother was the source of inspiration for his poetic and artistic creativity.

The most difficult question here, however, is the following: why did the marriage of Fon Sadriştayn and his ex-wife, Orhan Bey’s mother not work? They were both Turks and if the argument that his ex-wife was wasteful and irresponsible was nothing but the lie of “a chatterbox writer,” then what was the real reason behind their breakup? That is to say, if the most fundamental factor making a complete and harmonious family possible, which is the argument that is put forward in this paper, then why did it not work in the case of Fon Sadriştayn’s first marriage? The answer seems that although linguistic and cultural homogeneity is seen as the most fundamental factor, sometimes it might not be sufficient. If we believe in the first part of the story, then we can say that it is because of the luxurious way of life of Fon Sadriştayn’s wife that they broke up. Yet in the second part of the story, we see that it is a slander. However, Ömer Seyfettin does not tell us what the real reason was. Therefore, we are left without an answer to the following question: even when the fundamental principle for a successful family and nation is met, why does it not sometimes work?

I will now turn to the third story in this paper. First published in 1918, *Ashab-ı Kehfimiz* (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 76-117) is the story in which the failure in *Primo* and *Fon Sadriştayn* is overcome and the family is fully realized. It should be noted that the predominant part of this story revolves around a critique of Ottomanism.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it seems that the short introduction at the very beginning of the story is worth quoting. This passage is like a preface written by Ömer Seyfettin (1999c: 76-77) for the story:

I had written this little novel five years ago. My aim was not to constitute a literary work. I only wanted to compare our intellectuals’ strange thinking with the social reality. I had met with most of our great men after the Meşrutiyet. The opinion of all more or less was gathered

around that conclusion: “Ottomanness [*Osmanlılık*] is a common nationality. Ottomanness means neither only Turkishness, nor only Muslimhood [*Müslümanlık*]. Every individual living under the rule of the Ottoman state ‘without regard to difference of race and religion’ [*bilâ tefrik-i cins ü mezhep*] belongs to the Ottoman nation!” However, this view was only a fantasy [*vehim*], a crude fantasy that was born from the minds, which the anti-national [*gayr-i millî*] Tanzimat education brought up. It was not possible to constitute a ‘common [*müşterek*] nationality out of the summation of individuals whose religion, language, education [*terbiye*], history, culture [*hars*], *mefahir* are different. Was “Ottomanness,” in truth, something other than the title of our state? One was not able to call the Germans living in Austria as “Habsburg nation, Austrian nation.” Wherever a German is from, s/he was a German. We, who speak Turkish, were a nation who had a history of five thousand years, even of a lot old[er] myth [*esatir*]. In the country of the Ottoman state, in Caucasia, in Azerbaijan, in Turkistan, in Buhara, in Kâşgar, in brief wherever we live, we were still genuine Turks. Yet, the political views, social aims of the intellectuals who were attributing imaginary meanings to the word “Ottomanness” were funny to the extent that it would make tears come down from one’s eyes.

These esteemed gentlemen [*Bu muhterem efendiler*], were not still able to see the reality [*hakikat*] after the Balkan War. Then, I wrote this book. As the ideas in it are only Tanzimat inspirations, I had not tried to draw personal examples by attributing to some person. While the Turkish villager very well understands the boundaries of nationality as in “that whose language is in conformity with my language, that whose religion is in conformity with my religion...” [*dili dilime uyan, dini dinime uyan...*], intellectual gentlemen were attaching importance neither to the language nor to the religion. Eventually, here time taught them a frightfully good [*yaman*] lesson. In ten years’ time we experienced such events that each of them would not be able to take place in one century. In general, the value of nationality was recognized. One started to attach importance to the spoken natural language, national literature, national art, the ideal [*mefkûre*] of nationality. Today probably political views, stupid actions of the heroes in that book will appear as an extreme [*müfrit*] “exaggeration”, but still what is the aim of those who seem to be against patriotism [*milliyetperverlik*], Turkism [*Türkçülük*] in [the domain of] the language, literature, art, politics –which they cannot openly confess-? If there is one, are not they all these futile daydreams [*bu boş hülyalar*]?

The above quotation from Ömer Seyfettin is extremely significant primarily because it is his very straightforward answer to the following questions: what is a nation? What makes a nation a nation? What are its borders? With these questions and concerns in mind, he severely criticizes Ottomanism. The answer to the creation of the Turkish nation, as it can be seen, lies primarily in language and then in religion.

Hence what is the story of *Ashab-ı Kehfimiz* about? This story is the diary of a young Armenian man called Hayikyan. He wrote this diary between 1908 and 1913. Hayikyan is a committed person to the idea of Ottomanism. He does not like social and political views based on principles of nationality. Soon afterwards, he meets some Turkish intellectuals who believe in the idea of Ottomanism. After some time he meets some respected intellectuals of different national backgrounds, who are committed to the idea of Ottomanism like himself. Then, he joins their newly founded society called the “Ottoman Merging Club” [*Osmanlı Kaynaşma Kulübü*]. For some time, they only gather and have discussions on issues such as social institutions, the language of the Ottoman nation and the religion of the Ottoman nation. At this point it should be noted that these debates are pictured in a somewhat satirical and humorous way.

Gradually all the non-Turkish members do not attend the meetings of the club any longer as they did not like the idea of abandoning their own communities (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 96). There are now only 8 people left: 7 Turks and Hayikyan. In the story, the Turks are pictured as the most committed nation/people to Ottomanism. For instance, Hayikyan notes that:

I am thinking, if we Armenians, Greeks [*Rumlar*], even Arabs, Albanians do not show fanaticism/bigotry [*taassup*] in our nationality, Turks will not abandon the cosmopolitanism which they call “Ottomanness,” they will forget all their existence (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 101).

After some time, they publish a paper called “Humanity” [*İnsanlık*]. The language they suggest in the paper is an improved Ottoman that is composed of words and rules taken from several languages in addition to Arabic and Persian. The common religion of the fused Ottoman nation would be “*din-i İbrahim*” [religion of Abraham]. The piece that everyone likes the most is that of Hayikyan’s, which is entitled “In the Ottoman lands, in terms of race and religion, there is no one single Turk!” [*Memalik-i Osmaniyyede irken, cinsen bir tane olsun Türk yoktur!*]

At this point in the diary, the last several pages are from 1925. Hayikyan is writing the last pages of the diary in his room, he is very happy, because he is married to Hayganoş, an Armenian woman with whom he is in love and he is happy because he can hear his children playing downstairs.

He reports what happened to their society and to his friends. Their paper received a huge wave of anger not only from Turks but also from Arabs, Greeks and Armenians living in Turkey (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 111). The

entire Anatolia was shouting “I am a Turk!” There was a meeting in which 40-50 thousand people participated and cried as:

We are Turks, we are Turks... Our country is holy.

Our power comes from “unity,” our language is one (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 111).

The following day, in a newspaper the title of the editorial was *Ashab-ı Kehfimiz*. It severely criticized their paper and ideas. The newspaper did not, however, mention that among their Seven Sleepers was also an Armenian, Hayikyan. Only Armenian papers reported that: “There was also an Armenian among the Seven Sleepers of the Turks” (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 115). Consequently, their society came to an end and the members did not meet any longer.

It was around this time, Hayikyan met a beautiful Armenian girl, Hayganoş. When she first hears that Hayikyan was the Armenian among the Seven Sleepers of the Turks, she gets very worried. Thus, she advises Hayikyan to love his nation. She repeats her request over and over again whenever she sees him:

As she said “Love your nation...”, I started to love her. In any case, what is the difference between a genuine love for a woman and love of nationality?... Love of Hayganoş made me forget the Seven Sleepers and such unfavorable [*münasebetsiz*], meaningless businesses (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 113).

Furthermore, Hayikyan reports the change he has undergone as follows:

In twelve-year time the world has been upset. All life has changed. Like the Austrian, the Russian; the Ottoman Empire, too, went bankrupt. *Now the Arabs, Armenians, even in Jerusalem the Jews have their own separate states.* And me, what have I become... From time to time I have been a fanatical [*mutaassıp*] patriot [*milliyetperver*]. As Hayganoş loved me, I loved my nation. I understood that *there is no difference whatsoever between family and nationality* (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 116) (italics added).

As Hayikyan writes the above lines, Hayganoş comes and sees him writing Turkish. Crying, she asks him why he writes in Turkish but not in Armenian and asks him to tear that notebook (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999c: 117).

One can read *Ashab-ı Kehfimiz* as the fullest realization of the project of constructing a family and a nation. It overcomes the fundamental deficiency prevailing in *Primo* and *Fon Sadriştayn*. This deficiency is, as was stressed



earlier, the fact that first of all the members of the family are not of the same linguistic and cultural origins. Secondly, there is no missing member of the family, as in the case of Primo’s mother and Fon Sadriştayn’s son. On the contrary, Hayikyan and his wife are very happy with their children, they have no problems or tensions whatsoever. Theirs is a perfect picture of a family: loving parents with cheerful children.

## CONCLUSION

Literature can be used as a significant source for social, political and historical investigation. This essay is an attempt to read Ömer Seyfettin’s stories for an understanding of his approach to political issues of his times. Ömer Seyfettin’s short lifetime corresponds to the most turbulent times of his state, country and people. Like his contemporary fellow intellectuals in the country, he, too was concerned with the question of how to survive as a people and as a state. By means of an analysis of his three stories, I have tried to demonstrate that his answer and project was a Turkish nationalist one. I have attempted to demonstrate what kind of an imagining is in process in his stories. In this sense, a tenable observation is that the nation is imagined as a family. In other words, he pursues the answer to the question of how to become a successful nation in the most basic social unit; namely, the family. One can see that what makes the full realization of the family possible and successful is also what makes the creation of the nation possible and successful. The linguistic and cultural homogeneity of the family thus comes to the fore as the most fundamental characteristic of the successful family and nation at large. What he does with these stories is therefore to reflect on the most crucial macro social and political question of his time, i.e. how to survive as a nation and as a state, with a particular attention to the idea of family.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> I borrow the concept of “imagining the nation” from Benedict Anderson’s (2003) work that focuses on the origins and spread of the nationalist ideology.

<sup>2</sup> It seems possible that this personal experience in his family life had an effect on Ömer Seyfettin’s “imagining of the nation as a family.” It seems noteworthy that the same year he got divorced, he wrote *Fon Sadriştayn* and *Ashab-ı Kehfimiz*.

<sup>3</sup> The original is as follows: “Grazya, muzaffer, genç, kavi ve uyanık Turanın muhakkak galebesi altında ezilecek olan zayıf, hasta ve miskin Garbın korkak ve kadından bir timsali gibi hiçkırı hiçkırı ağlıyordu.”

<sup>4</sup> This is the nickname of the hero in this story. His real name is Sadrettin. The reason behind this nickname is because he looks as healthy and strong as a German.

<sup>5</sup> At this point one should remember Şerifsoy's analysis of the prevailing narrative in the Kemalist modernization project according to which parents symbolize the state and children symbolize the people. Taken together with the story at hand, it seems possible to speculate that the country lacking a linguistic and cultural homogeneity as well as the "true guidance of its leaders" is pregnant with social revolts, rebellions and disorder.

<sup>6</sup> One can come across a critique of Ottomanism in other stories as well. For example, in the story *Hürriyet Bayrakları* (Ömer Seyfettin, 1999a: 229-237), one reads the following:

The things that are not of the same sort cannot be summed. For example, ten chestnuts, eight pears, nine apples... How will you [be able to] sum [these]. This is not possible. And just like the fact that this impossibility is a mathematical (*riyazi*) and indestructible (*bozulmaz*) principle, it is equally impossible to sum and make one whole nation [out of] the nations whose histories, traditions, tendencies, institutions, languages and ideals are distinct from each other. You would be wrong if you sum these nations and call them 'Ottoman.'

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