Aesthetic Innovation in the Nation-Making of Japan and the Ottoman Empire: A Comparative Study

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In *Shōsetsu shinzui* 小説神髄 (The Essence of the Novel), the literary critic Tsubouchi Shōyō 坪内逍遥 (1859–1935) posited that the novel serves as "a guidebook" (*hyōbanki* 評判記) to life, referring to the Tokugawa 徳川-period (1603–1868) genre that reviews, critiques, and ranks actors, playwrights, etc. In this guidebook, a reader would find an account of the inner workings of society and of human nature, and "a graphic description of the reasons why one person fails, and another succeeds."[1] By way of such appraisal by the reader, it "ennobles character, provides moral instruction, supplements history, and furnishes a model for literature."[2] However, this guidebook, Shōyō argued, has always been looked upon as "a plaything" (*moteasobi* 玩具) in Japan. Compared to its Western counterparts, the Japanese novel "lacks the quality of refinement";[3] it is "not an art form but a nursery or boudoir amusement."[4] The novel was of utmost importance for individual and societal development, but according to Shōyō, Japan seemed to lack recognition of its value as well as lack a fine example of the genre.

Shōyō's account of the novel is shaped by two interrelated motivations: one aesthetic and the other political. His primary aim was evidently to elevate the status of the novel, transforming it from a source of entertainment into a respectable and refined art form. To this end, he carefully outlined the essential characteristics of the novel, effectively creating a prescriptive framework, that is, a guide to writing a guidebook to life. This ambition to redefine the aesthetic value of the genre constituted a deliberate act of aesthetic innovation, one deeply embedded in a broader civilizational discourse that conceptualized cultural development in terms of comparative and hierarchical gradations. This, in turn, brings us to the sociopolitical dimension of his argument: within this evolutionary narrative of civilization, artistic representation was expected to progress away from the fantastic and toward realism, mirroring society's progression toward a fully civilized state of development. This section on the benefits of the novel concludes with a call for Japanese authors to "work out a plan for writing the perfect novel" and to "make them

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1 Tsubouchi, "Shōsetsu shinzui," p. 54; Tsubouchi, *The Essence of the Novel*. All translations from Tsubouchi's "Shōsetsu shinzui" are by Nanette Twine.

2 Tsubouchi, *The Essence of the Novel*.

3 Ibid., p. 55.

4 Ibid.

flawless, better than those in the West, to produce a great art form fit to be called the flower of our nation."[5] This call showcases the inseparability of national destiny from aesthetic and literary production. The fate of the nation was inextricably linked to its aesthetic and literary imagination. Modernizing literature meant modernizing the nation and ensuring its continuity as an "imagined community" in the collective aesthetic consciousness.[6]

Shōyō was not alone in assuming the task of regenerating the art and language of his culture. Across Asia in the second half of the nineteenth century, a major preoccupation of intellectuals was to develop a critical voice to reform their cultures and modernize their literatures through various forms of aesthetic innovation. Understanding the emergence of cultural and literary modernity requires situating it within the simultaneous (and at times contradictory) process of the emergence of nationalism, rapid modernization, and the rise of resistance to Western imperial interests. Intellectuals of this period were particularly concerned with defining the national character of their cultures in response to the growing dominance of Western economic and cultural forces. This engagement with literary and cultural production was especially pronounced in Japan and the Ottoman Empire, both considered imperial powers at the time that, while not directly colonized, faced mounting pressure from Western expansionism. In the course of the nineteenth century, intellectuals in these societies came to recognize, often with a sense of crisis, how "backward" they were compared to Western Europe. As Western cultural and economic hegemony grew, they confronted urgent questions of national self-definition, debating how to revive their past glory while reforming their authentic cultures in order to "catch up" with the demands of (Western) modernity. In these non-Western contexts, the rise of national consciousness sparked intense discussions on ethical, aesthetic, and political dimensions of literary and artistic production. These debates unfolded as crucial arenas where competing visions of national identity, aesthetic innovation and representation, and sociopolitical ideologies converged, shaping the evolving landscape of cultural expression.

While discussions on political, social, and economic reforms were prevalent during this period, debates on art and literature occupied a particularly prominent space in intellectual discourse. Noteworthy journals such as *Meiroku zasshi* 明六雑誌 (The Meiji Six Journal) in Japan and *Servet-i Fünun* (The Wealth of Knowledge) in the Ottoman Empire featured intellectuals engaging not only with literary and aesthetic innovation but also with pressing issues in political theory, economics, and scientific progress. There was arguably no over-specialization, as the clear separation between cultural, political, and economic spheres had not yet fully materialized, and aesthetic and political concerns were often deeply intertwined. In this context, art and literature served as the principle focal point around which the emerging discourse on the nation crystallized, which raises broader questions about the role of literary discourse in shaping national consciousness. One might ask why there was such a pronounced emphasis on art and literature during this period, and whether there were more pressing concerns that warranted attention beyond cultural and aesthetic debates. Why did intellectuals devote so much energy to debates on innovating literary form, such as the tension between realism and romanticism, or the modernization of classical poetic traditions—for instance, *kanshi* 漢詩 in Japan and *divan* poetry in the Ottoman Empire? How did aesthetic discourse and literary practice contribute to the formation of national consciousness in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire and Japan, and in what ways did intellectuals in these contexts negotiate the tension between inherited literary traditions and the imperatives of modern nation-building in response to the cultural and political pressures of Western imperial expansion? Rather than anomalies or distractions, aesthetic debates were themselves understood as integral to larger cultural and political transformations, contributing to the conceptualization of a modern national identity.

Nationalism and Aesthetic Consciousness

Nineteenth-century literary and artistic culture in the Japanese and Ottoman contexts is a complex and dynamic field characterized by many radical discursive possibilities and negotiations before their gradual solidification around the various institutions of global

5 Ibid., p. 71.

6 Benedict Anderson's formulation of the nation as an "imagined community," in which shared cultural practices, particularly print-mediated forms, enable members of a nation to imagine themselves as part of a collective despite the absence of direct social ties. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

modernity. As part of this era of dissolution and reorganization, several factors play into the conspicuous and privileged status that literature enjoyed during this period. The first stems from censorship, or more broadly, political control over creative and intellectual activities, which had a significant impact on artistic and literary pursuits. It forced critics and writers to navigate a landscape of restrictions, fostering innovative forms and expressions and creating alternative maps of circulation. Examples from other monarchies abound: in Russia, the repressive political atmosphere of the late Catherine period (1762–1796), when the "enlightened" monarch turned despot and in 1790 exiled Alexander Radishchev (1749–1802) for writing *Journey from St. Petersburg to Moscow*; the *istibdad* (dictatorship) period from 1876 to 1909 under the Ottoman sultan Abdülhamid II (1842–1918), who kept the modernist poet and critic Tevfik Fikret (1867–1915) under house arrest for decades; or the 1875 Press Code of the Meiji Restoration, which mandated prison terms for authors who criticized the government or its officials.[7] The pervasiveness of state censorship likely drove intellectuals into relatively safe territory, where political discussion could be cloaked in the seemingly innocuous mantle of art and literature.

A second factor that played into literature's conspicuous status may be found in its increasing popularity, especially the novel as a genre. This trend reflects the transformation of reading culture and public opinion brought about by the rise of print capitalism. As literature was consumed by a growing segment of an increasingly literate population, intellectuals of the period recognized its potential not only to disseminate their ideas but also to shape and transform society. Literature's didactic and moral capacities, coupled with its broad reach into different social strata, led writers across the ideological spectrum—whether they were Westernizers, conservatives, or nationalists—to channel their intellectual efforts into the production of literary works and criticism.

A third factor that contributed to the central role of literature in the public discourse of the period lies in the very complexity inherent in the concept of literature, which carried over its classic premodern notion of "learning" and moral education into nineteenth-century intellectual discourse and practice. While modern conceptions of literature as a discipline and a national institution were gradually introduced, debated, and adapted, its premodern notions persisted. The idea of literature as encompassing a holistic body of books and writings, rooted in letters and learning, endured into the late nineteenth century. Its practice was not limited to creative writing but included all forms of learning, such as ethics, rhetoric, and governance. Many literati engaged in both literary and political pursuits, producing literary works alongside political treatises. The history of the concept becomes essential to understanding its prevalence in the nineteenth century when the process of its institutionalization and disciplinary specialization was not yet complete.

In spite of the important factors discussed so far, the first and foremost reason for the prevalence of literary and artistic production in the intellectual life of the period is that the idea of nationalism first finds expression in the aesthetic consciousness.[8] By this, I do not just mean aesthetic nationalism, but that the image of a nation, as a nation, finds expression first and foremost in the literary and artistic imagination. Literature, as an institution in the modern sense, is not a mere reflection of the reorganization called "Meiji" or "Tanzimat,"[9] which allows us to observe the social reality of the period. It is also in and of itself *the* reorganization around which an entire political and social transformation unfolds.

7 Rubin, *Injurious to Public Morals,* p. 21.

8 I use the term "aesthetic consciousness" not in Hans-Georg Gadamer's sense of the extreme abstraction of "aesthetic distinction" that abstracts art from its social and historical conditions (*ästhetisches Bewußtsein*), but rather as a conceptual capacity to imagine future structures of order, society, and political life prior to their concrete articulation (Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, pp. 84–96; Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 81–91). Rather than such hermeneutical approaches, this understanding aligns more closely with Marxist theories of culture that emphasize the role of aesthetic forms with respect to ideological and material conditions. For instance, Ernst Bloch's *The Principle of Hope* (1995) conceptualizes aesthetic consciousness as a site of anticipatory imagination, in which art and literature prefigure unrealized futures and alternative social formations. Rather than merely reflecting existing conditions, I understand aesthetic consciousness as a mediating force that has the potential to imagine new forms of collective life and political organization. For discussions on aesthetic consciousness borrowed from German aesthetics in the Japanese philosophical tradition, see Kowata, *Bi to geijutsu*.

9 "Tanzimat" literally means reorganization. It refers primarily to the Tanzimat Fermanı (Imperial Edict of Reorganization) of 1839, which inaugurated the period of reforms in the Ottoman Empire. In cultural history, it refers to the cultural production that raged roughly from the second half of the nineteenth century until the Balkan Wars (1912–1913) that sealed the fall of the empire. For more information on Tanzimat literature in English, see Ringer and Charrière, *Ottoman Culture*, pp. 193–208.

In the next sections of this article, following a comparative thread from West to East Asia, I explore the pervasiveness of aesthetics during this complete political and social reorganization, and its pivotal role in shaping the conception of a national literature, focusing on the late Ottoman Empire and Japan. The article thereby adopts a comparative historical methodology that brings into dialogue the literary, institutional, and ideological transformations of the late nineteenth century in these two imperial powers. It combines intellectual history and the sociology of literature to investigate how aesthetic forms became sites of negotiation over national identity and cultural authenticity.

The following sections examine the three aforementioned factors that shaped literary modernity: (1) the intersection of literature and state power, including censorship and state-led modernization, which prompted writers to introduce civic ideals into popular genres such as plays and novels; (2) the institutionalization of literature as both a legacy of classical traditions and a modern national discipline under contest; and (3) the emergence of print capitalism and literary criticism, which gave rise to a new cultural field in which literature served as a medium for the production of shared affect and symbolic community. By exploring each of these factors, the article shows that literary aesthetics is not a dependent variable of political and economic processes but possesses an autonomy that allowed intellectuals of the reorganization period to explore, open up, and negotiate new possibilities in the not-yet solidified national consciousness. This autonomy does not signify total independence from political and economic processes, but rather a distinct capacity of literary form and discourse to mediate, reflect, and reshape those processes symbolically and affectively.

Aesthetic innovation in the late nineteenth-century Ottoman and Japanese contexts involved the transformation and repurposing of inherited literary conventions, together with the emergence of new narrative strategies, genres, and critical vocabularies that allowed writers to negotiate the tensions between cultural continuity and modernization. These innovations extended beyond questions of style or technique; they reflected broader efforts to redefine the social and political function of literature within the modernizing nation. Aesthetic discourse thus became a space where debates on nation-building, institutional reform, and resistance to Western cultural hegemony were carried out. Rather than subordinating aesthetic questions to political ones, the article argues that literary form was itself a site of political imagination, in which the modern notions of the nation, the people, and cultural authenticity were conceived and contested. Drawing on a range of literary and journalistic materials, the article demonstrates that aesthetics offered a discursive and imaginative space through which intellectuals could navigate the conflicting and competing demands of modernization, authenticity, and cultural survival under the pressures of Western imperialism as well as its cultural hegemony.

Reorganization, Monarchy, and Literature

In the Ottoman Empire, reorganization began in the late eighteenth century, when a series of catastrophes alerted the Ottomans to the encroaching threat of European imperialism, particularly evident in the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–1774. The term "Tanzimat," meaning reform, refers to a crucial period in the history of the empire that emerged about half a century after the Ottomans first recognized the Western imperial threat. Beginning in 1839 with the proclamation of the Imperial Decree of Gülhane (Gülhane Hatt-ı Hümayun) by Ottoman Sultan Abdülmecid I (1823–1861), the Tanzimat lasted until 1878, when Sultan Abdülhamid II suspended the parliament following the Russo-Ottoman War (1877–1878). The war had devastating effects, both immediate in terms of economic hardship and the allocation of resources to warfare, and long-term in terms of the enforcement of unfavorable treaties, marking the end of the reform era and the beginning of an absolutist regime until the Young Turk Revolution of 1908.

Although the Tanzimat officially ended in 1878, the reform era had a lasting impact on cultural and literary production, which is now referred to as "Tanzimat literature." This literary period extends beyond the 1870s into the first decade of the twentieth century and shows continuities with broader efforts at modernization and Westernization up to the First World War. The Age of Reform emerged primarily as a response to rapidly expanding global modernity and Western imperial interests. The paradoxes of modernity were most pronounced in this period: on the one hand, it threatened the unity of the Ottoman Empire with rising nationalist movements and European colonialism; on the other hand, it offered the tantalizing prospect of overcoming Ottoman backwardness by emulating European progress. As a result, the Tanzimat era unfolded

simultaneously as a period of multiple crises in the face of impending collapse and as an era of the promise of rebirth and renewal fostered by accelerated reform movements.

Japan's encounter with the West and its subsequent reforms followed a trajectory similar to that of other non-Western states facing the threat of European imperialism, albeit with key differences.[10] Awareness of its vulnerability in the face of European military and technological superiority, did not begin with the forced opening of ports in the 1850s but had earlier precedents, particularly through Rangaku 蘭学, or "Dutch Learning." During the late Tokugawa period, scholars and officials engaged with Western scientific, medical, and military knowledge primarily through Dutch sources, laying the groundwork for later modernization efforts.[11] This exposure, however, was limited in scope and did not prevent Japan from facing the full force of Western imperial ambitions in the mid-nineteenth century. The realization of geopolitical inequalities became undeniable with the signing of the so-called "unequal treaties," beginning with the Treaty of Kanagawa (1854) and followed by similar agreements with other Western powers. Under these treaties, the Tokugawa shogunate, constrained by Western military superiority, relinquished control over tariffs and granted extraterritorial rights to foreign nationals, creating legal and economic asymmetries that severely curtailed Japan's sovereignty.[12] These humiliations, coupled with growing anxieties about its own perceived "backwardness" in science, technology, and governance relative to Western powers, prompted Japan to undergo a rapid transformation into an industrial nation-state, fundamentally restructuring its political, economic, and military institutions, and reshaping its social structures.

A key distinction between Japan and the Ottoman Empire during this period lies in the timing and intensity of their modernization efforts. The systematic state-led modernization characteristic of the Meiji era did not occur in the Ottoman Empire until after the Turkish Revolution in the 1920s. While the Ottoman Empire recognized the threat of Western hegemony as early as the late eighteenth century, Japan responded more swiftly and systematically to these challenges. The Ottoman reform process, in contrast, unfolded over a more extended period of time and involved fewer radical changes. Japan's Meiji government embarked on a state-led modernization drive immediately after the Meiji Restoration, encapsulated in the slogan "civilization and enlightenment" (*bunmei kaika* 文明開化). This included the widespread promotion of modern ideas through print media. Central to this effort was *Meiroku zasshi*, a journal founded by the Meirokusha 明六社 (Society of the Year 6 of the Meiji Era), a group of progressive scholar-bureaucrats.[13] The journal played a pivotal role in introducing, translating, and disseminating Western ideas, advocating for universal education, positivism, and enlightenment thought. Among its influential members was Fukuzawa Yukichi 福澤諭吉 (1835–1901), whose work *Encouragement of Learning* (*Gakumon no susume* 学問のすすめ, 1872–1876) became a foundational textbook in elementary schools, profoundly shaping the spread of new social ideals in Japan.[14]

In the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the nineteenth century, on the other hand, the print media was almost entirely private. The state was hardly involved in the dissemination of new knowledge but did often resort to censorship. It is important to note, however, that while the Meiji government actively promoted modern ideas through print media, it also maintained a strict policy of repression and censorship of

10 The Ottoman Empire had been extensively engaged in European political and military affairs since its inception, and its cultural landscape was significantly influenced by its proximity to Western civilization. In contrast, premodern and Tokugawa Japan remained largely isolated from Western influences until the forced opening of the country in 1853. The ethno-religious diversity of the vast Ottoman Empire, in contrast to the relatively homogenous nature of the Japanese polity, is a significant distinction. Furthermore, the immense expanse of Ottoman territory, as opposed to the compact and pre-national entity of the Japanese islands, underscores both the diversity and the heightened political complexity involved in governing the Ottoman Empire efficiently and effectively. These contexts are crucial to understanding the literary awakenings in both regions, keeping in mind these foundational differences. See Selçuk Esenbel's work for detailed analyses of essential similarities and important differences between Ottoman and Meiji reforms in the nineteenth century. Esenbel, "Türk ve Japon"; Esenbel, *Japon Modernleşmesi*.

11 On Rangaku, see Sugita, *Rangaku kotohajime*.

12 On the military history of the late Tokugawa and early Meiji 明治 (1868–1912) periods, see Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, chapters 9–11.

13 On the journal and selected translations, see Reynolds Braisted, *Meiroku Zasshi*.

14 Jansen, *Making of Modern Japan*, pp. 460–61; Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*.

print culture.[15] Finally, a noteworthy difference can be observed in the rates of literacy. It is estimated that at the turn of the century, the literacy rate in the Ottoman Empire was between 5 and 10 percent. In Japan, while regional variations were considerable, the available evidence suggests that literacy rates were approximately five times higher than in the Ottoman Empire during the same period.[16]

Despite differences in state involvement at the cultural level, both countries found themselves firmly in the grip of authoritarianism in the 1880s and 1890s. In the Ottoman Empire, it was during this period that the pervasive effects of imperial decline were felt most acutely. The erosion of the empire's social and political ideals, loss of loyalty among its subjects, the waning legitimacy of the sultanate, patrimonial rule, state authority, the failure of reformation efforts, and widespread corruption in both administrative and social relations gave rise to the liberal nationalist movement known as the "Young Ottomans." Driven by Enlightenment ideals and liberal political thought, without losing sight of Islamic values considered essential to the national (*milli*) spirit, they sought liberal constitutionalism as a remedy for disintegration. The proliferation of this liberal discourse, however, collided with the extreme measures taken by Sultan Abdülhamid II to consolidate the authoritarian and patrimonial system, particularly through the censorship of the press and his decision to suspend parliament indefinitely in 1878. As a result, obedience and subservience to the monarch became the highest virtues, and any form of disloyalty was considered a severe transgression against the state.[17] This clash between liberal ideals and Abdülhamid's authoritarian measures underscored the tensions that characterize this period in the Ottoman Empire.

Japan underwent a parallel experience of simultaneous state-led repression and modernization, mirroring the Ottoman trajectory. The popular movement "Freedom and People's Rights" (*jiyū minken undō* 自由民権運動) gained traction in the 1870s and 1880s, calling for a national assembly, a constitution, local autonomy, reduced land tax, and the abolition of unequal treaties.[18] After it developed into a widespread popular movement, it was suppressed by the authorities who used the constitutional development process as an excuse. The 1890s witnessed the national consolidation of the emperor system under constitutional monarchy and the concomitant promotion of modernizing reforms in administrative, legal, and educational domains. The Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890 promoted the moral education of the nation based on the virtues of duty, piety, and loyalty to the emperor, echoing the Hamidian principles being concurrently enforced in the western rim of Asia.

Both the Young Ottomans and the Freedom and People's Rights movements are closely related to the rise of politically conscious literature and the political novel in their respective cultures. With the aim of disseminating the ideals of freedom and equality and opposing the consolidation of a centralized state and monarchy, some members of these political movements wrote some of the most popular and influential works of the time. As Atsuko Sakaki points out, *Kokumin no tomo* 国民之友 (The People's Friend), one of the leading periodicals of the time, boasted a print run of only a ten thousand copies in 1887, while some political novels, such as *Kajin no kigū* 佳人の奇遇 (Strange Encounters with Beautiful Women, 1885–1897) by Shiba Shirō 柴四郎 (1852–1922), sold an estimated two million copies.[19] Authors of the period recognized the potential of literary production to educate and ultimately transform society.

The prevalence of political repression shaped the content and style of literary and artistic works in a manner that subtly fostered national consciousness. This indirect approach permitted writers to evade the censorship that would have been triggered by direct political commentaries and criticisms. In lieu of overtly addressing political concerns, they incorporated nationalistic notions and sentiments into their work through the use of allegory, symbolism, and themes pertaining to freedom. This strategy not only served to protect the creators from potential repercussions but also effectively fostered a sense of national unity and

15 See Kornicki, *The Book in Japan*, pp. 358–62.

16 For literacy rates in the Ottoman Empire, see Findley, *Ottoman Civil Officialdom*; Somel, *The Modernization of Public Education*. For early modern Japan, see Tsujimoto, "Maturing of a Literate Society"; Rubinger, *Popular Literacy in Early Modern Japan*; Rubinger, *A Social History of Literacy in Japan*.

17 For more information on censorship during the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II, see Kudret, *Abdülhamid Devrinde Sansür*; Demirel, *Abdülhamid Döneminde Sansür*.

18 For more information on the movement and its relation to the press, see Jansen and Rozman, *Japan in Transition*, pp. 231–47.

19 Sakaki, "Kajin no kigū," p. 84.

awareness among the general public. By incorporating these elements into their literary and artistic works, creators could inspire and cultivate collective national sentiments without attracting the attention and suppression of the authorities. After all, what better way to reach a wide audience of different classes through their emotional investment in the narrative than by writing popular novels and plays?

The prominent Ottoman Turkish writer, reformer, and member of the Young Ottomans, Namık Kemal (1840–1888), played a key role in introducing and popularizing the ideas of fatherland (*vatan*) and freedom (*hürriyet*) in public discourse, mainly through his plays and novels. His play *Vatan yahut Silistre* (The Fatherland or Silistra, 1873), with its eventful première on April 1, 1873, became a milestone in Ottoman theater after a police raid on the venue and the ensuing censorship of theater production until 1908.[20] It was the most popular play of its time. The story revolves around the romance between Islam Bey, a young man who voluntarily enlisted in the army during the Crimean War between the Ottoman Empire and Russia in 1853, and Zekiye, a young woman who followed him to Silistra (in modern-day Bulgaria) during the siege of the city by Russian forces. The internal and psychological dynamics of the love story parallel the heroic struggle of the Ottoman soldier, not only against an external enemy, but also against internal adversaries involved in corruption and betrayal of the country and its people. Moved by the patriotic sentiments fervently expressed in the play, audiences rallied in the streets in support of their own "*vatan*"—the empire in rapid decline. This fervor, however, came at a price. The play led to thirty-eight months of imprisonment for Namık Kemal, intensified censorship of emerging public opinion in the print media and sparked literary innovations whose effects would reverberate for decades to come. Beyond its historical consequences, the play serves as a literary testament to Kemal's romantic ideology of patriotism.

Yano Ryūkei 矢野龍渓 (birth name, Fumio 文雄; 1851–1931) also took on a variety of roles during the Meiji era, simultaneously pursuing a political and literary career. A founding member of a political enlightenment society closely associated with the Freedom and People's Rights Movement, Yano wrote one of the best-selling political novels of the nineteenth century, *Keikoku bidan* 経国美談 (Commendable Anecdotes on the Creation of a Nation: Young Politicians of Thebes; 1883–1884).[21] This novel, which depicts the decline of ancient Thebes, strategically distanced itself from the contemporary political atmosphere of Meiji rule, thus protecting its liberalizing sentiments from government censorship. Tomi Suzuki notes that in his introduction to the novel, Yano attempted to protect himself from government censorship by arguing that "the work should be regarded only as a *haishi-shōsetsu*, a plaything [*yūge no gu*] that allows people to wander in a world of fantasy. Nevertheless, he asserted that the story of the rise of democratic Thebes in ancient Greece was based on 'true' documented 'history.'"[22] Amid the rise of the Freedom and People's Rights movement, Yano's two-volume novel achieved remarkable popularity. It was reprinted in numerous editions, including adaptations for traditional performances and theater. It was acclaimed by audiences of "high" literature as well as by a broader readership inclined toward popular styles. The novel's wide appeal reflects its resonance with the sociopolitical dynamics of the Meiji era.[23]

While there are many differences between Kemal's and Yano's works, both are inherently political narratives created primarily for a public readership. Although Yano's work was written in the form of a novel, its rapid adaptation to the theater testifies to its public nature, and it has received widespread acclaim comparable to that of Kemal's work. Both narratives are allegorical in nature, depicting the corrupt condition of the Restoration, with wise and talented military leaders fighting against internal and external threats to their communities. Infused with an epic character in which the hero's destiny is inextricably linked to that of the community, both narratives extol the virtues of ethics, wisdom, and courage in envisioning a better future. By nurturing the dream of a homeland, whether in the temporally and geographically distant city of Thebes or in an outpost of an already shrinking empire, these popular works aim to educate audiences about freedom and civic democracy. Moreover, both heroes, Pelopidas and Islam Bey, owe their lives to a woman who is the

20 Kemal, *Vatan*. For more information on Kemal's plays and the performance scene in the late Ottoman Empire, see And, *Tanzimat ve İstibdat*; Sevengil, *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi*.

21 Yano, *Keikoku bidan*.

22 Suzuki, *Narrating the Self*, p. 19.

23 On political allegorization of democracy in Yano's novel, see Hashimoto, "Regional Literacy."

daughter of an official. The allegorically charged sentimental love stories woven into the fabric of political and militaristic narratives not only interpenetrate the personal and the political but also elicit emotional engagement from the audience. These two narrative functions converge to facilitate collective identification with the hero. They exemplify the essential characteristics that made the political novel and theater immensely popular in late nineteenth-century Japan and the Ottoman Empire. This popularity, in turn, led intellectuals to discuss changes in social and political organization through questions of literary production. The thematic occupation with social problems in literary representation would later culminate in the emergence of naturalism, particularly in a unique form in Japanese literature.[24] Before considering the role of the evolving print culture in establishing the centrality of literature in the emerging national culture, it is appropriate to briefly revisit the concept of literature itself from a comparative perspective.

Literature and Its Institutionalization

The concept of literature, with its inherent complexity, retained elements of its classical premodern essence, rooted in notions of "learning" and moral education. This continuity carried over into the intellectual discourse and practices of the nineteenth century. Although contemporary understandings of literature as a discipline and a national institution gradually emerged and were debated, the premodern facets of literature, characterized by its association with letters and learning and encompassing the totality of books and written works, persisted. It is crucial to keep in mind the historical evolution of this concept in order to understand its importance in the nineteenth century, a period in which the process of institutionalization and disciplinary specialization was still underway. The practice of literature in this period extended beyond creative writing to encompass a wide range of learning activities, including the cultivation of virtue, rhetoric, and government.

The contemporary use of the term *edebiyat* (literature) in Turkish refers to written and oral works specifically considered to have artistic merit, corresponding to the dominant modern definition of the term. However, as in the historical development of the concept in French, English, or Japanese, its premodern meaning extended well beyond the narrow scope of creative writing alone and encompassed multiple connotations. As Raymond Williams has shown in his account of the concept's semantic history, in its premodern definition, derived from the Latin *litteratura*, "literature" referred to "polite learning by reading," essentially a form of literacy and learning indicative of one's education and refinement.[25] A comparable semantic history also exists in Arabic and Persian traditions. In the Ottoman-Turkish context, *edebiyat*, derived from the Arabic word *adab*, was closely linked to *edep*, meaning decency, civility, and morality, and denoted the knowledge, wisdom, and manners required to belong to the literati. The literary realm was distinct from the world of oral culture, which included folktales, epics, and popular poetry. This refined world of letters was later commonly referred to as *divan*[26] literature, which was also known as *havas* (elite) or *saray* (court) literature. Literature then referred to a whole body of books and writings that were read, produced, and controlled by a small group of people that included "doctors of Islamic law (ulema), senior employees of 'departments' of the central administration (divan employees), and a few additional unaffiliated 'hommes de lettres,'" according to Şerif Mardin.[27] In this way, the status of an individual was defined and a clear distinction was made between the cultured elite and the uncultured masses.[28]

In Japan, the premodern concept of literature (*bungaku* 文学) has its roots in a dominant culture deeply influenced by an ancient and established tradition from China. Parallel to the Arabo-Persian cultural hegemony in the Ottoman context, Japan was also in the cultural magnetic field of a dominant and historically established culture. The term *bungaku* constituted the language and all the written texts that a cultured

24 On Japanese naturalist literature, see Yoshida, *Shizenshugi*. On naturalism in the late Ottoman context and its adamant defender Beşir Fuad, see Okay, *Beşir Fuad*.

25 Williams, *Keywords*, p. 134.

26 Interestingly, the term "*divan*" has two main connotations, political and literary. In political terms, it refers to the general assembly in Islamic states and all the state offices associated with it. In literature, *divan* refers to a poetic form in Ottoman Turkish literature, a genre widely used in classical and folk poetry.

27 Mardin, "Some Notes," p. 252.

28 For similarities with the original meaning of *adab* and its historical transformation in Arabic, see Al-Bagdadi, "Registers of Arabic"; Allan, "How Adab Became Literary."

person was expected to know, including official histories, philosophical and religious texts, canonical poetry, and others. It would exclude all forms of narrative and texts that were considered low or vulgar. Those who followed the literati path were referred to in Chinese as *wenren* 文人, which found its Japanese counterpart as *bunjin* 文人, both of which translate as literate and cultured individual. As Lawrence E. Marceau points out, this strong intellectual tradition distanced itself from politics, a constant disengagement that likely contributed to the heightened importance of aesthetic debates in the nineteenth century.[29] As this phenomenon continued through the modern period, characterized by increasing specialization in society, it slowly transformed into *bungaku* in the sense we still use today. The influence of Confucian and Neo-Confucian definitions, intertwined with the ancient literary tradition in both regions, further shaped this complex cultural landscape.

In exploring the emergence of literary modernity, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of employing national categories such as "Arabic," "Chinese," and "Japanese," which prove inadequate if not entirely futile. The late nineteenth century marks a time when the idea of a "national" language and literature had yet to be solidified. This ambiguity is particularly evident in the Ottoman case, where the term used at the time for any "national" connotation, namely *milli*, held diverse meanings, broadly referencing ethnic or religious communities. The distinct and deliberate division between Ottoman-Turkish and Arabic and Persian, or between Japanese and Chinese, marking the latter as foreign in order to render the former indigenous, had not yet materialized. One could also argue that it never truly has, given the disconnect between official national discourse and everyday cultural practices. Nonetheless, despite these complexities, these national categories might help us understand the stark differences between premodern and modern literary practices. In the second half of the nineteenth century, "literature" had still not gained its modern status as a cultural institution in both Japan and the Ottoman Empire. It still kept its broader definition in the Chinese and Arabo-Persian traditions respectively. The idea of a national literature, as *Osmanlı edebiyati* and *kokubungaku* 国文学, gradually evolved only to be materialized as an institution at the turn of the century. Neither *bungaku* nor *edebiyat* referred to literature in its modern sense before the mid-nineteenth century, whereas the modern transformation of the concept had already started much earlier in Western Europe. Raymond Williams, in his philological study of the concept, observes that the initial signs of a general change in the meaning of literature occurred in eighteenth-century England, where the term expanded beyond its connection with literacy.[30] Terms central to the modern and contemporary understanding of literature, such as "literary merit" and "literary reputation," were in use as early as the 1750s.

In the Ottoman context, the transformation of literature had to wait until the 1880s when the notion of authorship as a profession and literature as a specific form of writing first emerged. When Giambatista Toderini authored the first "literary" history of the Ottomans in 1787 entitled *Letteratura Turchesca*, literature encompassed all expressions of what was understood as culture.[31] Literature referred to everything that was transmitted through generations via writings and works of art, including the visual arts, philosophy, theology, mathematics, medicine, astrology, and law, as well as the institutions dedicated to their transmission, such as schools, academies, and libraries. Ottoman writers, however, did not engage with "literature" in the contemporary sense until the late 1870s. In 1876, the prominent Ottoman publisher, journalist, and historian Ebuzziya Tevfik published the first literary anthology of Ottoman-Turkish prose entitled *Numûne-i Edebiyyât-ı Osmâniyye* (Anthology of Ottoman Literature).[32] Instead of using the traditional term "inşa" for aesthetic nonfiction, Tevfik uses the term "literature" and marks it as "Ottoman," producing one of the earliest examples of this particular usage. In his almanac in 1880, Tevfik argued that "literature (*edebiyat*) is a crutch in Europe, but in our country, it has not even become a cane. That is to say, while Western literature in its current state of old age is leaning on its prosperous literary productions for the rest of its life, the intellectual and ornate products of our literati (*üdeba*) are not even sufficient to create youthful desire."[33] While it seems that its signification still included critical and non-imaginative writing (*mahsulat-ı fikriyye*), literature now signified a

29 Marceau, "Bunjin," p. 488.

30 Williams, *Keywords*, p. 135.
31 Toderini, *Letteratura Turchesca*.
32 Ebüzziya, *Numune-i Edebiyat-i Osmaniye*.
33 Ebüzziya, *Rebi-i Marifet*, p. 65.

body of work that was both modern and national that is associated with the imagined community of the Ottoman millet. Its modernity stemmed from comparison with its Western form, which had produced abundant and praiseworthy works of literary quality, and thus earned the maturity associated with the crutch metaphor. "Our" literature, by contrast, remained infantile in his view, whereas the vast premodern tradition of literary and artistic production was entirely disregarded in this context. While still semantically unstable, the use of the term "literature" shows clear signs of defining a modernized and institutionalized cultural practice, associated with identity based on local and proto-national cultural categories, and systematized as a discipline through national anthologies, literary histories, and academic reorganization.

It is no coincidence that the semantic transformation of the terms *bungaku* or *edeb* coincides with the imperative of cultural identification following the encounter with Western modernity. Although the concept of literature underwent a comparable evolution in Western Europe, transitioning from a more comprehensive notion of literacy and learning to one centered on creative writing, the non-Western case experienced it in an accelerated manner, imbued with a culturally comparative dimension. In Japan, the new notion of *bungaku* gained traction in the 1880s. Scholars often point to Nishi Amane's translation of the term in his *Encyclopedia* as an early instance during the Meiji period when the term began to acquire new meanings, encompassing both the broader idea of the humanities and the modern specialized notion of imaginative writing.[34] Washburn, following Isoda Kōichi's historical analysis of the term, notes that by the time Shōyō's *The Essence of the Novel* appeared in 1885, the sense of *bungaku* as literary art and as an institutionalized field of knowledge had already been established.[35]

The sense of immaturity and belatedness vis-a-vis the literature of the West we have seen in the Ottoman case was likewise familiar to Japanese intellectuals. Fukuzawa Yukichi's theory of civilization, in which Japan appears in a "half-civilized" stage, Shōyō's criticism of the crudeness of Japanese novels compared to those of the West, and Sōseki's reflections on the immaturity of Japanese literature all attest to an inevitable logic of comparison that underpins the modern understanding of literature.[36] The trajectory of literary history became a teleological narrative in which national literature unfolds in a linear fashion to achieve its fullest potential in expressing its unique national character. Although many authors were critical of this evolutionary and linear paradigm, including Sōseki and Namık Kemal, for instance, who sought to preserve the semantic richness of literature, it eventually evolved into its modern national character at the turn of the twentieth century.

Literature as a concept and a field was an unstable and highly contested topos, especially in the second half of the nineteenth century. Debates about its nature, function, political power, and authentic national character arose. This prominence of literature in political, social, and cultural debates and transformations, partly due to its traditional definition and practice, led many intellectuals to engage not only in discussions of aesthetics but also in the composition of literary works. For many, aesthetics had political and social implications that led them to pursue dual careers in politics and literature. The proto-national character was thus negotiated and shaped through literature, which provided a dynamic and versatile discursive space in which political action could be criticized, ethics and law in their modern configurations could be discussed, and "learning" could be popularized.

Print Capitalism and the Age of Criticism

The emergence of modern literary culture cannot be adequately understood without examining the conditions and circumstances of its production. Within this transformative period, literature assumed a symbolic role. It became the privileged object in the rise of other national institutions. The changing print culture and the emergence of print capitalism certainly played a significant role in this transformation. The introduction of movable type printing marked a historic shift, enabling

34 For a history of the concept of *bungaku* in scholarship in English and in translation, see Suzuki, *The Concept of "Literature" in Japan*; Washburn, "文学 Bungaku/Literature"; Shirane and Suzuki, *Inventing the Classics*. Also see Kōno et al., "Bun" kara "bungaku."

35 Washburn, "文学 Bungaku/Literature," p. 125; Isoda, *Rokumeikan no keifu*, pp. 7–40.

36 Fukuzawa, *An Encouragement of Learning*. For a compelling analysis of comparison as a cultural survival strategy in East Asia, see Park, "The Adaptive Comparative."

the mass production of books and contributing to the democratization of knowledge, at least among the literate population. In the 1850s, Europe experienced a significant increase in printing speeds, reaching up to eight thousand sheets per hour with the rotary press. This accelerated printing process not only facilitated mass production, but also sped up composition. The transition to steam presses and modern movable type was slow in both Japan and the Ottoman Empire, but by the 1890s the number of writers and readers in both cultures had skyrocketed as the social spectrum for both broadened. Literature thus became subject to the diverse demands and interests of a wider group of actors, including the reading public, patrons, publishers, critics, and, not least, censors. It gave these actors a sense of being part of something larger, of belonging to a community united around what they read and wrote. It is in this nexus that national consciousness emerges from aesthetic consciousness.

The importance of print capitalism in the development of national literary cultures has been discussed extensively, most notably by Benedict Anderson.[37] Anderson argued that the mass production of print media by private presses, driven by the pursuit of profit through attracting a reading public, played a pivotal role in fostering a collective identity among those who consumed the same cultural products. This "imagined" political community, he argued, became one of the fundamental foundations of the nation-state. The rapid expansion of print culture, spread across the country and across social classes, led to a relative stabilization of the printed language. In the 1880s, the *genbun itchi* 言文一致 movement, advocating the unification of written language with the spoken vernacular, gained traction in Japan, while Ottoman intellectuals of the same period were engaged in fervent debates over proper orthography and even syntax in newspapers. By the end of the nineteenth century, all the hallmarks of literary modernity were present in both cultures, including attempts to standardize the written language, vernacularization, the unification of script, and the rise of phonocentrism.[38] The shaping of the national imagination within the discursive and aesthetic space of late nineteenth-century Japan and the Ottoman Empire was unmistakable. Yet, it is important to remember that reading "nation" into this period's intellectual scene is a retrospective analysis. As Atsuko Ueda notes, the Meiji literati lacked a shared notion of a common national language to constitute an imagined national community. It may not have been their goal at all.[39] What later came to be solidified as a national culture in the early twentieth century was still a possibility, one among many other potential outcomes of late nineteenth-century modernization. It was precisely the aesthetic imagination that made possible the discursive fluidity and revolutionary potential.

After 1870, private printing presses gained momentum in the Ottoman Empire, paving the way for influential and widely read newspapers such as *Takvim-i Vakayi* (Chronicle of Events) and *Tercüman-ı Hakikat* (Interpreter of Truth). In the decades that followed, the reach of newspapers and literary magazines expanded significantly. Some catered to a broader audience by using vernacular and colloquial language, a style championed by politically engaged progressive figures such as Şinasi (1826–1871), Namık Kemal (1840–1888), and Ziya Paşa (1829–1880), as well as the commercially oriented Ahmet Midhat, the most prolific writer of the period. Others, on the other hand, specialized in what could be called high literature and culture, using a hybrid language with classical tones to appeal to a more sophisticated readership. The 1890s saw the emergence of the most important literary journals of the period, despite increasingly strict state control, while the number of literary works published almost tripled compared to the previous decade. A parallel trend unfolded during the Meiji era, when the total annual circulation of newspapers and magazines rose from 27 million copies and about 2 million books in 1889 to 86 million periodicals and 6.6 million books in 1896. This was also the era of magazines, which brought high profits to publishers and led to the segmentation of the market into high and low culture. Nathan Shockey notes that one of the leading publishers of the era, Hakubunkan, exemplified this by diversifying its magazine production, with general interest magazines such as *Taiyō* 太陽 (The Sun) and the highbrow literary magazine *Bungei kurabu* 文芸倶楽部 (Literary Club), which had the lowest circulation among its products. Despite its lower

37 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

38 For the history of phonocentrism in early Meiji, see Karatani, *Origins of Modern Japanese Literature*; for the late Ottoman Empire, see Ertürk, *Grammatology and Literary Modernity in Turkey*.

39 Ueda, *Language, Nation, Race*, p. 5.

profitability (fifty thousand copies per month, compared to more than a hundred thousand for the former every two weeks), its profound impact on literary production was undeniable.[40] The elite literary journals such as *Waseda Bungaku* 早稲田文学 (Waseda Literature) and *Teikoku Bungaku* 帝国文学 (Imperial Literature) found a niche in established literary circles or universities. Similarly, the highbrow proto-modernist journal in the Ottoman case, *Servet-i Fünun*, became a trendsetting publication among literati, especially in the 1890s, despite its limited readership. Writers of various persuasions and ideological positions responded to the literary and critical content of the journal with enthusiasm, if not occasional disparagement. For example, following the publication and positive reception of Halit Ziya's (1866–1945) realist novel *Mai ve Siyah* (Blue and Black) in 1896–1897 in *Servet-i Fünun*, Ahmet Midhat launched what would become known as the decadence controversy in his mainstream newspaper *Sabah* (Morning), which raged for over two years and involved more than twenty authors and numerous articles. The impact of the highbrow magazine was remarkable, despite its sophisticated language and content, and its limited audience.

The impact of debates on aesthetics and poetics, despite the limited readership of the literary journals that hosted them, serves as compelling evidence of the influential role played by aesthetic consciousness during the complex and convoluted transitions to nation-states in both Japan and the Ottoman Empire. The late nineteenth century witnessed a burgeoning era of criticism and debate. Tevfik Fikret's "Musahabe-i Edebiyye" (Literary Criticism) series, published in *Servet-i Fünun* between 1896 and 1901, stands out as the first significant attempt to critically observe and theorize the transition to literary modernity.[41] Deeply engaged in ongoing debates, Fikret constructed a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding the literature of his era, drawing on the diverse cultural, linguistic, literary, and religious heritage of the Ottoman Empire. This endeavor marked a clear departure from conventional analytical and rhetorical practices and signaled a transition to a modern understanding of literary criticism, epitomized by the journal *Servet-i Fünun* and its longtime editor, Fikret.

In Japan, a parallel development occurred with the journal *Kokumin no tomo*, which reorganized its layout in 1887 and introduced a special section called "criticism" (*hihyō* 批評). This was the earliest instance of a Japanese periodical explicitly designating space for texts aimed at providing systematic reviews of recently published materials.[42] The journal gained prominence as one of the most influential periodicals of the time, especially among young intellectuals. The emergence of criticism in the modern sense created a relatively democratic space for debate and discussion in the public sphere. Of course, as the political, economic, and cultural hegemony of the West grew substantially in both Japan and the Ottoman Empire, the most prevalent question underlying many others was one of cultural authenticity: How can we revive our authentic and traditional culture while reconciling ourselves with Western modernity?

Both cultures believed that they had a unique cultural heritage and held a special position as a bridge between Eastern and Western civilizations. They took pride in their special geographical position, one at the western and the other at the eastern end of Asia, and in their potential to bring together eastern and western cultures. Faced with the imperial and colonial ambitions of Western European nations, intellectuals in Japan and the Ottoman Empire focused on questions of cultural and aesthetic authenticity, and aesthetic innovation. Prevalent themes in these debates included lamenting the cultural decline of their culture and the urgency of modernization, expressed through metaphors of light, awakening, and rebirth versus darkness, sleep, and senility; and of evolution, national competition, and survival, among others. Counter-modernization and anti-westernization discourse typically grew out of a nostalgia for a bygone era of greatness, nativist idealization of pure local culture uncorrupted by modernity, and moral superiority of national culture over the West. Along the axis of unquestioned modernization and the regressive impulse of anti-modernization, we encounter a wide range of rhetorical and epistemological issues that reveal the conflicted nature of intellectuals' positions regarding their cultural identity and European thought. The West was associated with incongruous ideas and metaphors: on the one hand, it lacked the spiritual,

40 Shockey, *The Typographic Imagination*, p. 39.
41 Fikret, "Musahabe-i Edebiye."
42 Lozerand, "The Rise of Criticism."

religious, or cultural history attributed to the homeland and was often represented as morally corrupt by its focus on materiality; on the other hand, it was idealized for its technical and cultural achievements, against which the home civilization was always cast as belated or a failure. The idea of cultural authenticity and synthesis between East and West, past and present, traditional and modern became the central epistemological crux around which cultural modernization and aesthetic innovation debates took shape.

These debates eventually developed into the invention of an authentic national culture and the consolidation of a timeless national poetics in modern Japan and Turkey in the early twentieth century. The aesthetic effort to incite a renewal and recovery of an invented origin of national culture through archaisms, genealogies, and an ethos of origins eventually gave shape to a national consciousness that would later be mobilized by extreme nationalist tendencies in the 1930s and 1940s in both countries. But before this solidification, as this article has demonstrated, the aesthetic imagination, shaped simultaneously by expanding print capitalism and archaic traces of premodern literary practices, sought to construct new cultural forms after the encounter with Western modernity. Literary and artistic production did not merely reflect changes in the political, economic, and social world. Instead, it sought to represent its own problems of evolution, emancipation, and form, and served as a fundamental reorganizing force around which an entire political and social transformation took place.

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