

## AHMET HAMDİ TANPINAR'S VIEW OF CULTURAL CHANGE

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**Abstract:** Culture can be defined as a collection of spiritual values that upholds nations. The more the collection of spiritual values that occur religion, language, history, tradition and morality enrich, the more the nations advance. The nations who could not claim their cultural values and scorn them are doomed to destroy themselves in the future. In his works, Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar mentions about cultural crisis, cultural degeneration in the Turkish society, people stuck between the east and west after the Reforms and criticizes the Turkish people who deny their own culture.

In this paper, we have studied Tanpınar's revealing the corruption that occurred in Turkish society and also dealt with criticizing the people who are ignorant, uncultured and do not improve themselves. In our study, Tanpınar's critique of the cultural aspects of Turkish society, not compromising of their own values, recommendations to avoid the misbehaviors of leading Turkey's development and cultural loss are also included.

**Keywords:** Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, culture, Turkish society.

### AHMET HAMDİ TANPINAR'IN KÜLTÜREL DEĞİŞİME BAKIŞI

**Özet:** Kültür, milletleri ayakta tutan manevî değerler topluluğu olarak tanımlanabilir. Din, dil, tarih, gelenek ve törelerden meydana gelen manevî değerler topluluğu ne kadar zenginleşirse, milletler de o kadar yücelir. Kültürel değerlerine sahip çıkamayan, onları hor gören milletler, gelecekte kendi kendilerini yok etmeye mahkûmdur. Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, eserlerinde, Tanzimat'tan sonra Türk toplumunda meydana gelen kültür bunalımını, kültür yozlaşmasını, Doğu ve Batı arasında bocalayan insanları ele alır ve kendi kültürünü inkâr eden Türk insanını eleştirir.

Bu çalışmamızda, Tanpınar'ın Türk toplumunda meydana gelen yozlaşmayı ortaya koymasını ve bu konuda bilgisiz, kültürsüz olan, kendini geliştirmeyen insanları eleştirmesini ele aldık. Çalışmamızda, ayrıca Tanpınar'ın Türk toplumunu kültürel açıdan eleştirisinin yanı sıra, kendi öz benliğinden taviz vermemesi, Türkiye'nin kalkınması ve kültür kaybına yol açacak davranışlardan kaçınması konusunda tavsiyeleri de yer almaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, kültür, Türk toplumu.

Cultures and civilizations are affected by other cultures and civilizations. The importance of comparative literature is that the literature found in human

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history is affected by each other. While a nation's knowledge, wisdom and surrounding culture are being formed, their development is often revealed by the society's writers. While national and local conditions influence a society's writers, the influences of outside cultures are equally important.<sup>1</sup>

In this universal process called "being cultured", the cultural assets components change and develop as a society undergoes modernization.<sup>2</sup> Culture is continuity from the past to the future as a presence of having lived, living and letting anything live.<sup>3</sup>

In his novels Tanpınar mostly works with characters who fall into crises because they are stuck between the Eastern and Western cultures. Therefore, these two cultures are constantly debated in his novels.

Mumtaz is dependent on his old culture and history; he knows his traditions and customs very well. He is religious and he does not ignore the western culture. He also owns an intellectual personality. It is thought that Tanpınar tells us about himself through Mumtaz's character.

Tanpınar's father was an intellectual who had been a kadi (judge of Islamic law) and served justice for years. Tanpınar had a childhood in what outweighs religion and traditions. At the beginning of his teenage years and in later life he recognized western culture and adopted it in Istanbul.

Tanpınar indicates that for ensuring the continuity of the Turkish culture, Turkish society should avoid imitating the West. He says that imitating the west unconsciously will allow to spread as an infectious disease anywhere in our culture and our cultural values. Tanpınar emphasizes that westerners continuously develop themselves and advance in every field, on the contrary, Turkish society, stuck in the lethargy and sluggishness, waits everything to come under its feet.

Tanpınar expresses the indifference of the Turkish people in *A Mind at Peace*:

"Mumtaz had been searching for a nurse for three days. He had taken a lot of addresses and made many telephone calls. But in our country when you search for something it gets lost. The East is a place for sitting and waiting. With a little bit patience she comes to you. To give an example, after Ihsan is recovered a few nurses will call him for sure. But when we need them..."<sup>4</sup>

Tanpınar defends that modernization and change happening randomly and without considering the result on the Turkish society would damage our culture and our values attached to it. Tanpınar defends the resistance movement against the existing administration and the fights for freedom during the Administrative Reforms, but he considers with fear that the resistance fighters do not think about what they will bring. Instead, only of the eliminated ones.

Tanpınar emphasizes that Turkish society did not get together or provide integrity. According to him, it was unstable in progress and development. But the situation was the same in India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan. These countries have also lived as colonies, hungry and poor for years; they became mere spectators while their cultures were being destroyed by the colonizers. They have not done anything to recover their cultures, either.

In *Composition in the Mahur Mode*, Tanpınar defines the contrast between the east and west through Sabri Hoca as follows:

“My son Behcet, what do you know about the bankruptcy of a civilization? Human beings get spoiled and disappear. A civilization is a spiritual treasury which creates unique human beings. Do you understand now how big the trouble is? If you are illiterate you can learn to read. If you fall behind, you catch up. If there are no men you raise them up. One day they are grown. If you do not have any money, you earn it. Everything has a solution. But when a human being gets spoiled, there is no solution. You are interested in bookbinding. You do know what a headband of a book is. In our society human beings are without headbands... For them the life is managed by atonal, noncoherent and a heap of dead values non-responsive to today’s life. We are living in a heap of contrast. The whole Orient world is suffering. They are changing shirts continuously. Indian, Chinese, Afghan, Arab and Turk, we are all changing. (...) What we need is not a different shirt, what we need is an internal change. (...) We need to establish our humanness all over again, on a new basis; a human being living with new values.”<sup>5</sup>

Tanpınar defends that development and modernization of the country is tied to the elimination of the differences between the two cultures. Related to this issue, he wrote:

“The life has not come even to the level of our own needs; it is not the abundance or creativity that offers us shapes and values spontaneously! We are experiencing this dilemma in our art, entertainment, moral values, good form and imagination of our future. We are happy to live on the surface. As soon as we go too deep, the indifference and pessimism begin. (...) We need to be more conscious and strong minded than every other nation.”<sup>6</sup>

Tanpınar says that Turkish society should protect and nurture their national life. He warns that if Turkish society does not hold on tight to their cultural values; the nation will lose its spiritual power and experience disasters. Tanpınar continues as follows:

“We lived in the middle of a hostile world and were protected from its fire for centuries by our being wrapped in our nationality, like a talismanic rescuer. We are present here today due to that feeling. As soon as we left our nationality, the disasters rained down on us. (...) Because we knew that our nationality was the memory of the religion, moral values architecture and the stack of art works and history which joined our national life.”<sup>7</sup>

In *The Time Regulation Institute*, Tanpınar emphasizes the vacillation and corruption between the East and West and cultures, which began in Turkish

society after the Administrative Reforms, and he criticizes the Turkish people for denying their own culture. Tanpınar reflects upon the corruption of music occurring in Turkish society through Hayri İrdal's sister-in-law and he criticizes the ignorant and uncultured people, and do not increase their knowledge of the music. Hayri İrdal's sister-in-law is a singer at a bar. Tanpınar criticizes İrdal and his friends' listening to his sister-in-law at her first night at the bar as follows:

"At the first night, Pakize, Halit Ayarçı, Doctor Ramiz and all my family were in the audience. (...) Every technical error my sister-in-law made was applauded madly. While I felt embarrassed for her, she became the heroine of the night. The audience screamed 'long live', 'aunt', 'sister'. Pakize turned and asked me every two minutes, 'how is she?'"<sup>8</sup>

Halit Ayarçı behaved like a cultural bureaucrat and demonstrated how little he knew about music. He gushed:

"Yes, as see it... The lady will really succeed... We have to believe in life Hayri Bey. (...) Do you see how she is liked? This is a lively human being facing humanity. She will succeed from now on. You will see how successful she will be."<sup>9</sup>

Turkish music, Turkish folk dance and musical instruments hold important places in Turkish culture. Tanpınar mentions that all these things enrich the Turkish culture. Tanpınar says that so-called intellectuals lost themselves and started imitating new things for the sake of Westernization. He states that Turkish society should not compromise its own values and should avoid behaviors leading to the loss of culture, preventing Turkey's development. In *The Time Regulation Institute*, Tanpınar criticizes sarcastically the cultural corruption of the people, who did not know what to do as they were stuck between the Eastern and Western civilizations.

In *The Time Regulation Institute*, a Dutch scientist named Van Humbert also attended a musical performance where Turkish society's being stuck between the East and West and resulting cultural corruption are criticized sarcastically. Those who attended the show performed local folk dances and fell into funny situations. This is also criticized by Tanpınar. While İrdal's older sister-in-law was screaming out a song, she suddenly started performing an active lively folk dance. At that time, a woman in the crowd cannot stop herself, got up, threw herself into the middle of the hall and started dancing 'çiftetelli', which she could not manage at all. Tanpınar criticizes such illiterate behavior as follows:

"Mid-way through a local dance, a young woman threw herself into the middle of the dance hall and started dancing çiftetelli. She could not manage to dance. But it was not important, everyone was pleased. A middle aged man, no doubt her husband or lover, did not want to leave the young woman alone. And he threw himself in the middle of the dance hall, as well."<sup>10</sup>

Tanpınar expresses his embarrassment at how the Turkish community fell into ridiculous situations in front of foreigners, by describing Irdal's younger sister-in-law's actions while dancing with an American as follows:

"To tell the truth, while they were dancing they were torturing and behaving cruelly towards each other. My younger sister-in-law had taken off her socks and low-cut shoes, and with her one hand on her partner's shoulder and the other hand on her skirt, which was not short enough. She was jumping around the floor, throwing herself here and there. Just as I was about to run to help her in case she broke her leg, she got up again and resumed jumping. She was hugging her partner, kicking, butting her unknown enemies and, again, lying on the ground."<sup>11</sup>

While Irdal's older sister-in-law had gathered around her half of the city's population with her kicking and jumping up and down, on the other side of the hall, her daughter Zehra was busy teaching Van Humbert how to dance 'zeybek'. Irdal described this situation:

"We went there with our glasses in our hands. This was not anybody's idea. Naturally it was the goods itself. The jazz was playing for zeybek. And my daughter and Van Humbert were dancing the most unbelievable zeybek, just in the middle of the hall, where my sister-in-law had exhibited all of her skills. The people around were just watching them. For a while we watched Van Humbert's arms overhanging in the air awkwardly and his knees hardly getting up."<sup>12</sup>

Turkish society floundered between the Eastern and Western cultures because of its unconscious fondness for the West. He mocks Turkish society, on the verge of forgetting their own culture, through Irdal:

"I wish they could have managed to dance. To be an example, I wish my daughter really had known how to dance zeybek, my sister in law had known what kind of dance she was performing, she would not have destroyed the music as if she were breaking a chair for which she was now too big to sit in."<sup>13</sup>

Irdal did not like the neighborhood he lived in but did not do anything to change it. Ayarçı said to Irdal: "*This is the truth my dear friend. When you reached a little bit prosperity your old world began to recede from your memory. You find sacrificing unnecessary and extra.*"<sup>4</sup> Upon hearing these words Irdal concluded: "*he misses his former life*"<sup>15</sup>

Ayarçı implied that Irdal will not give up anything he owns and revert to his former days. He believed that Irdal "*should revert to his former days that he misses*"<sup>16</sup> and continued as follows:

"Let me tell you your own truth! Now you cannot revert to your former days, because you cannot give up anything. Despite all your criticism, and contempt, you have a comfortable life and a beautiful wife and you also have a mistress, over whom you are getting crazy. I'm sure you are ready to sacrifice yourself for your daughter and son at any moment. Moreover, even

if you consider a lot of things meaningless, you like your reputation. In short, you stick to the world with many arms like an octopus! You cannot leave anything. How will you return?"<sup>17</sup>

In *A Mind at Peace*, the message Tanpınar would like to transmit through Nuran is the unity and togetherness of Turkish society. According to Tanpınar, an elegant and urban girl's growing up in the Bosphorus, yet knowing and singing the folk songs of different regions and of Turkish music was an indication of the unity and togetherness which must be within the Turkish society, along with traditions, customs and clothes. Tanpınar is keen on Turkish music and he transmitted this keenness upon Nuran as follows:

"Nuran also knew public songs she had learned from her grandmother, who was Bek-tasi and had traveled widely and had seen many things. This rooted family's daughter, grown up on the shores of the Bosphorus, liked folk singers, Rumelian, Kozan and Afşar's ballads, Kastamonu and Trabzon's folk dances, and Bektaşî's wind instrument musicians like Dede or Hafız Post. She sang those songs in the way she liked and she was a new horizon for Mum-taz. He thought that she was a young bride from Kütahya going to Girls' Day, wearing her gilded, silver thread embroidered shoes, and colorful velvet and satin clothing. In fact, this delicate urban girl had something in common with those people whose music styles she adopted for herself. Day by day, in his eyes, all these things were changing, completing and giving a discipline of a spirit of love to his darling."<sup>18</sup>

In *A Mind at Peace*, Tanpınar tells of an uneasy and critical period just before World War II. During this period, he mentions the Eastern and Western dilemma and the indifference towards the Turkish culture. Nuran and Mumtaz had the following conversation:

"- Why are we bound to the past so much?

- Inevitably we are the parts of the past. We love our old music, we understand it. We have a key in our hands to open the past for us... It is giving us its time, wearing for us all the names, as we have a treasure within us, we look around through the ferahfeza or Sultaniyegah."<sup>19</sup>

Tanpınar expresses that everything the Turkish society had was in its music. He continues as follows:

"According to Mumtaz, Istanbul's landscape, our whole civilization, our dirt, rust, good side and shortly our music were all in music. The West does not understand us because they do not understand our music. This was so much like that; many landscapes would come into mind when listened to Turkish music."<sup>20</sup>

In fact, with these words, Tanpınar is in search of peace, somewhere for Turkish society to shelter itself from its troubles. To tell the truth, Mumtaz found his much sought after peace in music.

Tanpınar criticizes Turkish society's dancing of pure, simple and beautiful Anatolian dances in different environments, from time to time, for the sake

of their personal tastes. In *The Woman on the Moon*, he criticizes so called intellectuals as they watched a young woman dancing something between çiftetelli and an Anatolian dance and their applauding for her according to her gyrations:

“The woman was walking moving her neck, shaking all her body, while turning another side, performing a belly dance widely from her ankle to her hip, as if she were at a drinking party with dancing girls, she was bending her body backwards in front of men.”<sup>21</sup>

In *The Woman on the Moon*, in the field of folk dances Asim was also very ambitious. At a night club Asim danced zeybek, çiftetelli and kaşık. While Asim danced, he passes out. Selim said that that night Asim was really nice. He was ingenious from top to toe and imitating a Greek woman’s speech.<sup>22</sup> Tanpınar says that Selim was surprised at Asim’s dancing çiftetelli and criticized the situation as follows:

“He was behaving coquettishly as if he really had women’s breasts, bending enough at his waist to touch his head to the ground in front of the men. But zeybek had become something different. He was not the man surprising the guests at his table, as well as the waiters at the restaurant, by imitating the woman, giving plenty of tips at the entertainment place and speaking severely and harshly. Entirely someone else, a whole tradition, mountain music and Yörük dance, everything was here. He was so interesting that even Selim had admired him. But just in the middle of the dance, as soon as the zeybek kneeling rises from the ground, Asim suddenly started to shake his head and soon after this dance move, despite the music being played, he started to dance a dance from another region.”<sup>23</sup>

In *Those Outside the Scene*, on a September evening, after dinner, Tevfik Bey and his guests went sailing on the Bosphorus. They met Greeks having fun playing mandolin and kithara, and Americans having fun playing balalaika. Tanpınar complained: “All these foreigners were disturbing us to death.”<sup>24</sup> Tevfik Bey says to the boatman: “Go back, let’s give those guys a lesson.” and implies that he cannot accept the situation. Tanpınar says the following for Tevfik Bey: “Amidst the voices of the people living in this city, the voice of our own civilization increased the most widely. (...) First the kithara and mandolin, then the ones in the steamboat and, finally, all around quieted down. Tevfik Bey’s voice had captured the Bosphorus alone.”<sup>25</sup> Tevfik Bey, having silenced all the foreigners on the boats, asked his boatman to go home after a while, and then by saying, “If I go to bed without dancing zeybek, I get sick.”<sup>26</sup> he expressed his exuberance for that night. None of the foreigners in Turkish territory can act as challengers. Exactly at this point Tanpınar reminds the reader of the existence of the Turkish identity and Turkish culture. Tevfik Bey sang ghazal in front of the foreigners and then went home and danced Zeybek to reveal the values of the Turkish culture.

As conclusion, "Culture" is defined as a collection of moral values that upholds nations. The more the spiritual values consisting of the religion, language, history, tradition and morality enrich, the more the nations get bigger and bigger. The nations who could not claim their cultural values and contemptuous of them are doomed to destroy themselves in the future. Tanpınar emphasizes that above all Turkish society should grow up conscious, cultured and educated people. Tanpınar does not want to stick to the East, or surrender fully to the West. He says that Turkish society will reach the goal when they consider both cultures individually. Because, according to Tanpınar, the east and the west are in our lives. Tanpınar implies that the innovation and modernization movements And especially the social and economic development of the country coming with Tanzimat have been sacrificed because of the misleading practices. He also implies that one of the biggest reasons of this; the statesmen and politicians ruling the country remain stuck between the western and eastern cultures and act extremely unconsciously. According to Tanpınar, the only way to get rid of the depression and the only way to prosperity and enlightenment is to try to adapt to the West on the way to democracy, What's more, to keep and treat people equally to each other, Underline how important the people is in Turkey's development, eliminate all the barriers between people and the intellectuals.

## FOOTNOTE

- 1 Mehmet Önal, *En Uzun Asrın Hikâyesi, Yeni Türk Edebiyatına Teorik bir Yaklaşım*, Ankara, 1999, p. 89.
- 2 Bozkurt Güvenç, *Türk Kimliği-Kültür Tarihinin Kaynakları*, Ankara, 1993, p. 138.
- 3 Op. cit., p. 231.
- 4 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Huzur*, 16. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul 2008, p. 10.
- 5 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Mahur Beste*, 7. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2005, p. 87-88.
- 6 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Huzur*, 16. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul 2008, p. 246-247.
- 7 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Yaşadığım Gibi*, (hzl. Prof. Dr. Birol Emir), 5. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2006, p. 198-199.
- 8 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Saatleri Ayarlama Enstitüsü*, 10. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2005, p. 221.
- 9 Op. cit., p. 222.
- 10 Op. cit., p. 332.
- 11 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Saatleri Ayarlama Enstitüsü*, 10. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2005, p. 332-333.
- 12 Op. cit., p. 335.
- 13 Op. cit., p. 336.
- 14 Op. cit., p. 337.
- 15 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Saatleri Ayarlama Enstitüsü*, 10. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2005, p. 337.
- 16 Op. cit., p. 336.
- 17 Op. cit., p. 337-338.
- 18 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Huzur*, 16. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2008, p. 149.
- 19 Op. cit., p. 170.
- 20 Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar, *Huzur*, 16. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul 2008, p. 170.
- 21 Tanpınar, Ahmet Hamdi, *Aydaki Kadın*, 2. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2009, p. 215.



<sup>22</sup> Op. cit., p. 261.

<sup>23</sup> Op. cit., p. 261.

<sup>24</sup> Tanpınar, Ahmet Hamdi, *Sahnenin Dışındakiler*, 7. bs., Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2005, p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Op. cit., p. 160.

<sup>26</sup> Op. cit., p. 161.

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