

Menfa: Self-Reflection in Ahmet Mithat's Memoirs after Exile

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There is a kind of writing where a person writes his own curriculum vitae (*tercüme-i hal*), mixed with his memoirs, which the Europeans call autobiography; we can also call this a personal curriculum vitae. Actually, because in writing one's own curriculum vitae, one also writes his memoirs and observations about life, these works can be considered partial memoirs. In the Tanzimat period, Ahmet Midhat gave the only example of such a work, *Menfa*.¹

This is what İsmail Habib Sevük, a famous Turkish literary historian, says in his book *Tanzimat'tan Beri Edebiyat Tarihi* (History of Literature since the Tanzimat), published in 1944. In the quotation above, he is talking about the famous Ottoman intellectual and novelist Ahmet Mithat's unfinished autobiography called *Menfa*, which means "the place of exile." As Sevük correctly points out, *Menfa*, first published in 1876, is the first Western style autobiography in Turkish literature. But even as late as 1944, Sevük was searching for a way to express and explain what autobiography was in Turkish because evidently, there were not many examples of autobiography written in Turkish.

One example of a Western autobiography that late nineteenth century Turkish intellectuals seemed to have been familiar with is *Confessions*, whose author, Jean Jacques Rousseau, was widely read. Although it never was published, *Confessions* was translated to Turkish by the famous poet Ziya Paşa (Sevük 1940: 132) and the manuscript of this translation might have circulated among the intellectuals of the time, including Ahmet Mithat. We also know that Ahmet Mithat spoke French and read a lot in French as he indicates in many of his own books. In his novel *Esrar-ı Cinayat* (Mystery of Murders), first published in 1884, Ahmet Mithat mentions Rousseau's *Confessions* (*İtirafat*) and criticizes it for having long discussions on everything that is stated in it and thus being too verbose. Since Ahmet Mithat has read it, he may have taken Rousseau's *Confessions* as an example for himself. In the first lines of *Menfa*, he discusses this book and says that he

¹ "Bir de kısmen 'Hâtırat'la karışık olarak bir kimsenin kendi tercüme-i halini bizzat kendisi yazması şekli vardır ki, frenkler buna autobiographie (otobiyografi) derler; buna 'Şahsî tercüme-i hal' diyebiliriz. Tabii kendi şahsî tercüme-i halini anlatırken araya hâtıralar ve başka müşahedeler de girdiği için bu kısım eserler kısmen hâtırat sayılabilirler. Tanzimat devrinde bu tarz eserin tek nümunesini Ahmed Midhat Efendi verdi. Bunu Rodos'ta menfi iken *Menfa* isimle yazdı ve 1293 (1876)da kitap olarak neşretti" Sevük 1944: 187.

was not the first one in the world to write such a personal adventure book (*sergüzeştname*) and that there were many examples of such works, which indicates his awareness of autobiographical works in the West.

Menfa is not half as sophisticated as Rousseau's self-conscious *Confessions*, and the two texts furthermore differ greatly in terms of content. Where Rousseau tries to reveal the inner truths about himself in his autobiography, Ahmet Mithat mainly tries to reveal the political truths about himself. If there is self-reflection in an autobiography that memoirs lack,² then we can say that *Menfa* is an autobiography because here Ahmet Mithat tries to answer the questions, "Who am I?" and "Why did my life turn out to be what it is?" But it is obvious from what he says about Rousseau's *Confessions*, that for him an autobiography ought to reveal certain facts about a person's life without getting into any philosophical discussions about them.

Ahmet Mithat also seems to have been aware of the nineteenth century Western trends in autobiography because at the beginning of *Menfa*, he says that he may not be an important person, but that his experience in life is very important, especially for the young people of the age. He says, "My intention in writing this book is such that you need not worry about how important a person I am. My real aim is to give my friends an exemplary lesson, a warning about life."³

In the early nineteenth century, English autobiography writers were using terms like "useful and instructive" to present their work to their readers. Laura Marcus, in *Autobiographical Discourses*, says that these are "terms frequently employed by critics throughout the nineteenth century in arguing for the moral worth of autobiography" (Marcus 1994: 35). Ahmet Mithat emphasizes the moral worth of *Menfa* by repeating in a number of places in the book that what he is writing here as his life experience is exemplary and instructive for the people of his time.

Menfa consists of two distinct parts of equal length: first Ahmet Mithat's private life, childhood, and pains of growing up, and then his public life, and his exile to Rhodes. In relation to autobiography, Marcus says:

The spatial metaphors of inside and outside which repeatedly appear in a range of critical discussions (about autobiography) are closely linked with oppositions between self and world, private and public, subjectivity and objectivity, the interior spaces of mind and personal being and the public world..." (Marcus 1994: 4).

In *Menfa*, both of these spaces are used. Ahmet Mithat talks about his personality and his childhood years which were spent in the Balkans and in Baghdad up

² For a discussion of the differences between autobiography and memoirs, see Marcus 1994: 6-9.

³ "Evvel emirde şurası malum olmalıdır ki bu sergüzeştnameyi yazmaktaki maksada göre benim kendi mahiyetimde bir ehemmiyet olup olmadığını taharri icab etmez. Maksad-ı asli ihvan-ı zamana bir numune-i ibret vermektir" Ahmet Mithat 2002: 15.

until 1871, when he finally settled in Istanbul. The second part of the autobiography deals with how he came to be sent to exile and the time he spent there.

Already at the beginning of *Menfa*, Ahmet Mithat makes a distinction between fiction and fact and places his autobiography in the second category. This seems to be a relevant concern on the part of the author because he has been publishing fiction up to that time and using the first person singular, the “I,” in his narration. He says at the beginning of *Menfa*, while discussing fiction and fact:

I shall not write the story of my life in the first way. That is, I shall not present my benefactors, my precious readers, with a novel in which I shall be the hero. I have already written novels to entertain my readers. As long as they are eager to read them, I shall, God willing, continue writing them. But here I intend to write my adventures in the second way. That is, this time I shall appear before my readers as I really am (Ahmet Mithat 2002: 13).

This insistence on the factuality of *Menfa* by Ahmet Mithat reminds one of what Laura Marcus puts forth in her book about Western literature. According to Marcus, the nineteenth century autobiography had to be redefined because “the fact that the eighteenth century novel usurps first person narrative and thus renders uncertain the authenticity of the autobiographical ‘I,’ and the distinction between autobiography and fiction” (Marcus 1994: 13-14).

Ahmet Mithat repeatedly assures the reader that what he is writing here is not fiction but fact. When telling about his childhood, he says that he was a stubborn and obnoxious child and that in his youth he would lose himself in extravagance and debauchery. He uses all these confessions to assure the reader that he is only telling the truth and nothing but the truth about his personality and his life, even if these truths were not something to be proud of. These assurances are used to prove that he is telling the truth in the second part of the autobiography, in which he talks about his political affiliations, or rather the lack of them.

Ahmet Mithat was exiled on the pretext of “provocative publication” along with writers who were affiliated with the Young Ottomans (*Yeni Osmanlılar*). The Young Ottomans were a group of young intellectuals who were against absolute monarchy and wanted to establish a constitutional monarchy in the empire. Most of them were the famous writers of the time. But the palace considered them revolutionaries. Five such writers were arrested and sent to exile at the same time. As well as Ahmet Mithat, the most prominent Young Ottoman, Namık Kemal, was among them.

In the second part of his autobiography, Ahmet Mithat separates himself from the Young Ottomans and their political views by saying that, although he liked the Young Ottomans when he was very young, he gradually came to see that their ideas were not timely because the Ottoman public had to be educated first, before dealing with any political changes in the country. In *Menfa*, Ahmet

Mithat emphasizes the importance of education for the Ottoman public and believes that political discussions and political changes should come after raising the consciousness and the intellectual level of the Ottoman people. He is for evolution, not revolution. In *Menfa*, in telling about his growing up and his development through education, he is actually reaccounting the evolution in his own life. So his textual choices are compatible with his ideological choices.

The prominent literary historian and novelist Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar believes that this autobiography is “a kind of establishing one’s position” for Ahmet Mithat (Tanpınar 1988: 451). After he has been sent to exile along with some Young Ottomans by Abdülaziz, in April 1873, and spent 38 months, that is three years and two months, in exile under governmental supervision in Rhodes, he is pardoned with the others in May 1876, when Abdülaziz is dethroned and Murat V comes to the throne.

Ahmet Mithat writes this autobiography in the summer of 1876, at the age of thirty, during the three-month reign of Murat V. He seems to look back on his past and re-evaluate it in order to determine where he stands politically after the exile. As Georges Gusdorf states in “Conditions and Limits of Autobiography,” “The man who recounts himself is himself searching his self through his history; he is not engaged in an objective disinterested pursuit but in a work of personal justification” (Gusdorf 1980: 39). In *Menfa*, Ahmet Mithat is trying to persuade the public that he never did anything to deserve a punishment like exile in the first place. He does not wish to be considered among the Young Ottomans just because he was sent to exile and pardoned at the same time with them. Gusdorf says that many autobiographies by public figures are written in order to clarify some misunderstanding about themselves (Gusdorf 1980: 36).

Ahmet Mithat underlines the fact that he is writing this book at a time when the Young Ottomans are seen in a much better light than before, that is, during the reign of Murat V, who was close to the Young Ottomans. So he insists that his opposition to the Young Ottoman ideas is not self-censorship, since he can now freely be on their side, if he wished, without any political repercussions. But in *Menfa*, it is obvious that he has not yet decided on a distinct political stance, as he praises Namık Kemal, the most important of the Young Ottomans, about whom he will write critically later. He only insists here that he does not agree with this group politically.

This unfinished autobiography ends in the middle of a sentence. Since at that time many books were published in parts, in fascicles, it seems that Ahmet Mithat stopped writing his autobiography when Abdülhamit II came to the throne at the beginning of September 1876. Ahmet Mithat may have stopped writing *Menfa* in order to start writing *Üss-i İnkılap* (The Basis of Revolution). After the enthronement of Abdülhamit, Ahmet Mithat will make his political choice swiftly and decide to stand on the side of the new sultan. The first volume of his two volume book, the infamous *Üss-i İnkılap* in which he praises Abdülhamit, is

published at the end of that year around the time when the first constitutional monarchy is established by Abdülhamit in December of 1876. Before the second volume of *Üss-i İnkılap* came out in the fall of 1877, Ahmet Mithat also published *Zübdetül Hakayık* (Essence of Reality) in the same year. These three books sealed the political choice of Ahmet Mithat as a supporter of Abdülhamit.

As Ahmet Mithat is writing *Menfa* in the summer of 1876 in Istanbul, Sultan Abdülhamit, his future affiliate, is not yet on the throne. Ahmet Mithat's political inclination begins to emerge in his autobiography, in which he seems to be taking the first steps and preparing the way to his final political stand which he will be held accountable for throughout his remaining life. In *Menfa* his political inclination is not yet that clear. But when Abdülhamit comes to the throne, Ahmet Mithat decides to make a clearer political statement with *Üss-i İnkılap* and leaves his *Menfa* unfinished.

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