

The Concept of Patriotism and Struggle against Imperialism in the Selected Poems of Mehmet Akif Ersoy and W. B. Yeats

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ABSTRACT

In the early twentieth century, imperialism was living its hey-day, with almost more than half the world as the colony of the European imperial powers particularly that of Britain and France. Realizing the destruction and damage that the colonizers had done to their countries, a wide range of people from politicians to writers, poets and ordinary people started to move against the colonizers. In India, Africa, Middle East and even in Europe there were a lot of people who opposed imperialism and colonization. Mehmet Akif Ersoy from Turkey and William B. Yeats from Ireland represent the literary side of the struggle against imperialism. Both these poets lived in the same era (late 19th and early 20th centuries) and they embarked on a struggle against imperial powers with their pen. Mehmet Akif gave material and spiritual support to the Anatolian people with his writings against the occupation of the Allies after WW II. In order to regain the Irish their cultural independence, Yeats tried to show ways of bearing up the British Imperialism which had been dominant in Ireland for centuries by making use of Irish national cultural values and folklore. This study aims to explore and comparatively evaluate the concept of patriotism and the struggle against imperialism in “The March of Independence” by Ersoy and “Easter 1916” by Yeats.

Keywords: nationalism in Ersoy and Yeats; struggle against imperialism; independence; colonizers; patriotism

INTRODUCTION

One of the best ways of understanding and evaluating the ideas of a poet or a writer of any country is to compare him or her with the poets and writers of other countries who have similar points. The categories that the works of these literary men and women are placed in, and the time periods that the authors lived are important criteria for a proper comparison. The other necessary element is to understand the purpose for which they wrote their works. In this study, considering that they lived in the same era and in countries which had undergone similar political movements, the works of two poets, Ersoy from Turkey and Yeats from Ireland, will be comparatively analysed with reference to the issues of nationalism and the struggle against imperialism because they both struggled against imperialism in their terms and maintained this struggle via their poems.

The number of comparative studies on both Ersoy and Yeats is not high. It is hard to find a detailed study on Ersoy comparing him with Yeats. For Yeats, the study of Gauri Viswanathan constitutes a good model, for Viswanathan compared the Irish nationalism of Yeats and Indian nationalism of Rabindranath Tagore in his article titled *Ireland, India, and the Poetics of Internationalism*. In this article, Viswanathan approached the issue of home rule both in Indian and Ireland mainly through the perspective of internationalism after the First World War (2004, p.7).

Across the world, a wide number of countries and societies suffered much from the oppression and tough rule of imperial and colonial countries. Although the concept of imperialism coined at the turn of the nineteenth century (Moses 2008, p.4) was used for different meanings at different times, it was commonly used as “the submission of small

weaker states or nations to the interests of bigger and stronger ones partially or wholly” (Koebner & Schmidt 1964, p.xxiii).

Looking at the recent centuries of world history, it is seen that the British Empire is the largest empire that expanded on earth thus earning itself the name of an empire on which the sun never sets. It achieved to keep its presence both within the region it is located and various parts of the world directly or indirectly, and sought its self-interests. Particularly at the end of the nineteenth century, it was a super power in terms of its economy and geographical expansion. On the other hand, in the colonies of Britain there were constantly occurring independence movements and attempts. These attempts were realized both in political, social and literary and many other fields.

This study intends to shed light on the examples of anti-imperialism and the methods applied for this purpose in the selected poems of Ersoy and Yeats who represent the literary side of anti-imperial struggle. Ersoy, as a reaction to the occupation of the Ottoman State by the western imperial powers, helped the Anatolian people with his poems and sermons raising their morale. As Selahattin Yasar mentions;

Islamic scholars, thinkers, poets and literary men such as Mehmet Akif Ersoy, Esref Edip, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and Suleyman Nazif tried to spread the idea of “Islamic union” among the Muslims, readjusting it to the conditions of the century and the state (1994, p. 71).

As it may be understood from here, the best solution that these intellectuals and scholars found is the idea of an Islamic union which will resist the divide and rule principle that is one of the most important methods of imperial powers. According to Yüksel Kanar, the basic reason why Ersoy adopted the idea of Islamic union is that “this ideal was the only remedy that would save Turkey and the whole Islamic world” (cited in Ersoy 1997, p.10). In many of Ersoy’s poems, one can find a lot of examples that demonstrate his resistance against imperialism and colonization. In this study, *Independence March* will be analysed with respect to its emphasis on anti-imperialism, independence and patriotism comparing with *Easter 1916* by Yeats. The other poet who endeavoured to awaken the national feelings and the spirit of national consciousness in his people’s mind is the well-known Irish national poet, W.B. Yeats. He aimed to awaken the sense of cultural nationalism and resistance against British imperialism through cultural awareness. It is a fact that the role of cultural nationalism in the destiny and future of a nation cannot be ignored. As John Hutchinson points out “Cultural nationalism conceives of a nation as a creative force, nations are not just political units ‘but organic beings, living personalities, whose individuality must be cherished by their members in all their manifestations’ (Hutchinson 1987, p.13). In this sense, the efforts of Yeats to raise cultural nationalism in Ireland through his writings cannot be underestimated. On the other hand, Ersoy puts more emphasis on verbal struggle rather than cultural one.

There are similarities between the two poets. First of all, both poets lived in the same periods - late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. What Ersoy is to Turkey in terms of nationalism and patriotism, Yeats is to Ireland. He became one of the symbols of Irish nationalism with his poems and other literary works. Yeats believed that the future of Ireland is dependent upon the Irish writers who supported Irish independence and national culture and folklore. For this reason, he became one of the forerunners of Celtic Twilight that attracted attention to Irish national culture and heroes, traditions, past, myth and folklore. He put much effort in maintaining the resistance against British imperialism with the power of literature and for this purpose he wrote a wide number of literary works like poems, plays and prose. His poem *Easter 1916* and *An Irish Airman Foresees His Death* are some of them. The efforts of Yeats to maintain Irish culture and folklore drew the appreciation of Edward Said

who is one of the leaders of postcolonial literature movement and Orientalism. Said praises the cultural resistance Yeats gave against imperialism with his pen in these words:

Despite Yeats' obvious and, I would say, settled presence in Ireland, in British culture and literature, in European modernism, he does present another fascinating aspect: that of the indisputably great national poet who during a period of anti-imperialist resistance articulates the experiences, the aspirations, and the restorative vision of a people suffering under the domination of an offshore power (1994, p.220).

Here, Said particularly draws attention to Yeats' fight against imperialism through his writings on the Irish people and their ideals and experiences, which helped the Irish promote a sense of national consciousness and independence in spite of the oppressions they were subjected to. He compares the struggle of Yeats to that of Said himself against Jewish imperialism in Palestine. He details much about the cultural resistance Yeats showed against British imperialism particularly, in his *Culture and Imperialism* in which he also touches upon the cultural imperialism which is realized through literary works and the struggle against this type of imperialism with the method of writing against imperialism.

While Ersoy resisted Western imperialism in general, Yeats resisted British imperialism. In WW I, Turkey was occupied by the Allied Powers, and not long after began the struggles in different parts of Anatolia against these invasions. Ersoy's selected poems demonstrate how the Turks were keen on their independence in the course of history. He not only emphasized Turkish nationalism but also independence in his poems.

Through his poems, Yeats intended to direct the Irish who were living under British rule for centuries and exposed to British culture, customs and language to regain their national independence, and national culture and identity. Therefore many of his poems target restoring the culture peculiar to Ireland and Irish past (Yeats 1994, p v). In other words, while Ersoy was encouraging the Anatolians who were kept under occupation for a short period of time to regain their independence, to protect their national and moral values, Yeats tried to awaken the sense of patriotism and nationalism in the Irish people thus gaining them a national spirit and identity that were necessary for independence. This was because British imperialism was systematically isolating the Irish from their core values. John Mitchel stated this situation as:

The English are not more sanguinary and atrocious than any other people would be in like case, and under like exigencies . . . the disarmament, degradation, extermination and periodical destruction of the Irish people are measures of policy dictated, not by pure malignity, but by the imperious requirements of the *system* of Empire administered in London (cited in Lynch 2007, p.82).

As Mitchel expressed, in Ireland, there has been a long-lasting and systematic policy of destruction toward the Irish. Yeats, however, wanted to put an end to this imperial legacy in his country.

MEHMET AKIF AND *THE INDEPENDENCE MARCH*

This poem was written in the late period of the Ottoman State and in the early years of the establishment of the new Turkish Republic. At that time, the Turkish army was at war against the invaders forces. In various parts of Turkey, national communities and patriot guerrillas were involved in this war. While war was continuing at fronts on the one hand, on the other hand, some national writer, poets and intellectuals were both giving support to these efforts and trying to resist against imperialism with their works.

Mehmet A. Ersoy, known and commemorated as Turkey's national poet, became a leader for the Anatolians via his poems and sermons and he was also a source of morale to the soldiers at the front. For, Ersoy had common thoughts and emotions with those who attended the national campaign as İsa Kocakaplan stated, (1999, p.51) and this allowed him to reflect on their thoughts and feelings properly. Besides, Ersoy was issuing a periodical together with Eşref Edip named Sebil-ur Reşad. He was expressing his important views about his country in this magazine. Most of the poems in his *Safahat* were written here as well (Aydın 2006, p.10).

During the years of the Independence War, the Turkish National Assembly went into action so that a poem could be written to emphasize the keenness of the country for independence, that they lived independently, they cannot be captivated, they have a strong love of homeland, and a competition was to be organized but, the written poems did not get enough acclaim. The Education Minister of the term, Hamdullah Suphi Tanrıöver did believe that the person who could write this march in the best way was Mehmet A. Ersoy, so he wrote to Ersoy. Ersoy accepted this mission without considering any plan of getting the prize (Aydın 2006, p.6). The poem Ersoy wrote was applauded very much and was reread in the assembly. Today there have been different studies on this poem. One of them is an MA thesis of Rıza Aydın called *Türkiye'de Ortaöğretim Kurumlarında İstiklal Marşı Söyleme ve Yönetme Problemleri*. For Aydın;

The Independence March is a unique work that immortalizes Turkish Nation's war of independence and freedom, and gathers this nation on the ground of common thought and values. It is the symbol of our national unity and togetherness. This march, with its succinct lines, reflects the Turkish nation's love of home and flag; the passion of freedom, independence and modernness perfectly (2006, p.5).

W.B. YEATS AND *EASTER 1916*

Yeats, known as one of the Irish national poets, used his pen to restore the Irish culture, old Celtic traditions, folklore and myth. The ideal of Yeats was to add Irish national and literary values into the British literature, mainly dominant on the island. One of the principal reasons for this is that for centuries British culture, literature and lifestyle was imposed on Ireland, and the biggest damage to the Irish culture came in 1848 during the famine, when a big majority of the Irish was drawn into the British culture (Williams 2007, p.75). According to the claim of historian Nicholas Canny from National Irish University, the famous English poet Edmund Spenser brought the British thought system to Ireland with his such works as *The Faerie Queene* and *View of Present State of Ireland*, and later they were used in the republican Oliver Cromwell's systematic colonization of Ireland (Cleary 2007, p.29). As a reaction to these, Yeats contributed to Irish nationalism and culture with his works. Therefore, the nationalism of Yeats is not political but literary and since he was far from politics that's why he met fewer political problems (Williams 2007, p.73).

Participating in the activities of organizations like the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League, he tried to contribute the revitalization of traditional Irish culture, sports, language and clothing style (Williams 2007, p.76). Inspired by the old Irish myths, he helped Irish cultural nationalism develop with his poems and plays. He was also one of the founders of Irish National Theatre Society together with such names as Lady Gregory and J.M Syng. The role of this association in protecting Irish literary and national values against the British cultural imperialism is of high importance.

With his poem, *Easter 1916*, Yeats both encourages the Irish public to resist against British imperialism and he exalts those who were killed in the 1916 Easter Rise. Yeats, who

draws a bad portrait about the independence of Ireland in his earlier poem, *September 1913* as David A. Ross mentioned, began to become more hopeful with the events in 1916, and his belief in independence was revived (2009, p.88). Ireland is one of the oldest colonies of England, so it was seen as an indispensable part of British Empire. Yeats, however, advocated that independence is the right of Ireland believing that Ireland is a separate country with its own national history, literature, folklore, mythology and culture.

In addition, the simile of stone in the third and fourth stanzas is to criticize the Irish who remained subservient under the rule of British Empire. Indeed, many of England's colonies in Asia and Africa had begun to take a stand against British imperialism and to struggle for their freedom. Believing that the same struggle was to be demonstrated by the Irish, Yeats tried to encourage them to make a struggle for independence.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF ERSOY'S AND YEATS' SELECTED POEMS IN TERMS OF THE STRUGGLE AGAINST IMPERIALISM

Both Mehmet Akif and Yeats make use of heroism in their selected poems. They intended to make their people more familiar with their past, ancestors and respectfully remember them. Mehmet Akif memorializes the soldiers killed in the war, and similarly, Yeats highly mentions the insurgents killed in the way for rebellion against the British rule.

In the sixth stanza of the poem Akif warns the Turkish nation to be conscious of their martyrs' ancestors lying under earth.

View not the soil you tread on as mere earth - recognize it!
And think about the shroudless thousands who lie so nobly beneath you

Ersoy goes on to memorialize the Turkish martyrs in the following stanza,

What man would not die for this heavenly piece of land?
Martyrs would gush out should one simply squeeze the soil! Martyrs!

In the same way, Yeats also commemorates some of the insurgents in the Easter Rise, in the last stanza of the poem; he gives their names and thus glorifies them.

I write it out in a verse -
MacDonagh and MacBride
And Connolly and Pearse
Now and in time to be,
Wherever green is worn

Thus, while Yeats immortalizes the rioters who took part in Easter Uprising and were captured and killed, Ersoy memorializes those Turkish martyrs lying under earth. The difference is that Yeats gives the names of the Irish killed, but Ersoy doesn't mention names, he just refers to martyrs in general.

One of the primary sources of Ersoy's nationalism is his keenness on and love for his country, past and Turkish people. In different parts of his *Independence March*, he mentions this love for his nation and past. The poem begins with a call to Turkish nation and encourages them to fight against the enemies and gain their independence.

Fear not! For the crimson flag that proudly ripples in this glorious
twilight, shall never fade,

Before the last fiery hearth that is ablaze within my nation is
extinguished.

In these lines, the poet gives hope to the public who became poor and weak during WW I and stimulates the Turkish soldiers at front against the occupation forces. At that time, Anatolia was in extremely poor condition in terms of military ammunition, economy, health, logistics and food, and people were suffering from hunger and diseases. Moreover, thousands of Turkish soldiers were killed at different fronts. Akif claimed that this country would not be lost until the last furnace was extinguished. In Anatolia, furnace comes to mean home, homeland, dorm; the poet means that if there is still someone who lives in a home or a place, it means that place was still not lost. Thus, the word “fear not” in the first line was used to imply that this country would not be damaged or lost before everybody and everything were lost.

In the next stanza, the poet personifies the Turkish flag and calls to it, he implores it not to frown because if it frowns, it means that this war may be lost. For, if a country’s flag does not wave, this may mean that that country came under the role of another one, which the poet opposes. For him, the Turkish people have always been keen on their independence. For example, in the third stanza, he emphasizes the importance of this for Turks as:

I have been free since the beginning and forever shall be so.
What madman shall put me in chains! I defy the very idea!
I'm like the roaring flood; trampling and overflowing my dyke (weir),
I'll tear apart the mountains, fill up the open seas and still gush out!

Like Ersoy, Yeats has the characteristic of sticking to his nation and its past and restoring it. In many of his poems, the reason why he refers to Irish history and mythological characters can be explained with this fidelity. For instance, he refers to Irish mythological heroes like Cuchulain and Fergus in his poems *Who Goes with Fergus* and *Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea* (Yeats 1994, p.34). The objective here is to remind the Irish who had been under the strong influence of British literature and art, their own mythological heroes and to help them be inspired by their national past.

The other factor that fed Mehmet Akif’s national feelings and made him a lover of homeland and independence is his strong connection to Islam. He lived as a pious person, and he used to pray for his country and nation (Çitçi 2008, p.118). Except for these, in his sermons he also prayed for the soldiers at war. Çitçi claims that Ersoy used to pray for victory and success and help of God (2008, p.124). He used to believe that real heroism and success came from God. In his selected poems, he drew attention to the role religion played in the independence and union of Turkish nation. As an example, at the end of the second stanza he says, “For freedom is the absolute right of my God-worshipping nation.” In this line, it is obviously seen that freedom is associated with religion and God. He both eulogizes the Turks as they believe in God and he emphasizes that they deserve independence. Again in the seventh stanza where he compares his homeland to Paradise, he prays to God so as not to lose this homeland.

What man would not die for this heavenly piece of land?
Martyrs would gush out should one simply squeeze the soil! Martyrs!
May God take my life, all my loved ones and possessions from me if
He will,
But may He not deprive me of my one true homeland for the world.

The poet puts emphasis on the thought that he is ready to give all what he has but he cannot give up his homeland. Being a martyr is a high glory for a person who is killed for his homeland in Islam. According to Islam, the persons who become martyrs are awarded with special pleasures and blessings. Therefore, the Turkish soldiers fight even at the cost of their life and desire to be martyrs. In the following stanza, the connection between the Turkish nation and God is getting stronger.

Oh glorious God, the sole wish of my pain-stricken heart is that,
No heathen's hand should ever touch the bosom of my sacred Temples.
These adhans, whose shahadahs are the foundations of my religion,
May their noble sound last loud and wide over my eternal homeland.

As it is obvious in this stanza, the desire and deep love for homeland in the poet and the Turkish nation result from their connection to God and His orders. The poet moves on to pray to God so as not to lose this Muslim land to those who are not Muslims, because in a Muslim land the call for prayers is recited five times a day and if this land passes to the hands of non-Muslims, calls for prayers will be cut. Accordingly, the common desire of Ersoy and Turkish people is the continuance of Islam in this region. Besides, Ersoy wanted not only Turkey but the whole Islamic world to be saved from the the imperial powers. This is because at that time most of the other Islamic states were under the domination of European imperial powers like England, France and Italy. In other words, this war is the war between the Muslims and Christians; yet, the basic reason for the war is not directly religion but a matter of European imperial interests.

Similarly, it is religion again that encourages the Turkish soldiers against the Allied Forces and the risk of being killed. The soldiers are ready to die for the sake of their homeland and religion. In the fourth stanza, Ersoy criticizes the Westerners who boast of their armoured units and he speaks highly of Turkish soldiers since they believe in God and Islam.

The lands surrounded by the Western's and they armored with walls of steel,
But I have borders guarded by the mighty chest of a believer.
Recognize your innate strength, my friend! And think: how can this fiery faith ever be killed,
By that battered, single-fanged monster you call "civilization"?

The metaphor of “single-fanged monster” in this stanza is of high importance to understand the situation of the imperial powers. It can be understood from this metaphor that European imperial powers attack on weak and small states like a real monster. According to Kocakaplan, however, the reason why Akif used this metaphor is that although imperial powers seemed horrifying, they lost their previous strength (1999, p.55). Furthermore, in the twentieth century, the European powers began to lose their domination over their colonies. In this sense, Ersoy implies that the end of imperial powers is soon. For, after a period of time, against the colonizing European powers, both Turks and other Muslim or non-Muslim states embarked on a struggle of independence and they gained their independence within this century. In essence, the sole tooth of the monster metaphor would be gone later.

Despite the fact that they have many commonalities, Ersoy and Yeats fall apart in many issues in their poems. Unlike Ersoy, Yeats did not make use of religion and religious elements in his struggle against imperialism and in his way of cultural resistance. He behaved sceptically about the issue of religion. In other words, for him, religion is a phenomenon that requires a scientific examination (Welch 1992, p.105). However, it is a fact that although both of them are Christians, Ireland and England had different sects. While the Irish were

mostly Catholics, the English were Protestants, the formal religion of the state. Handling the issue from this perspective, the Catholic Irish people are seen to have rebelled against the Protestant English. Yet, Yeats did not make the element of religion a means for resistance and cultural restoration because he was already a Protestant and not a Catholic. Therefore, religion does not have an efficient role in the struggle against imperialism and the reviving of traditional Irish culture.

While the struggle for independence in Anatolia in Ersoy's poem was realized through a realistic and systematic army, this struggle in Yeats's poem is more symbolic because those who initiated the rebellion and tried to gain independence were only a troop consisting of 1200 armed persons (Dorny 2010, p.1). Ersoy was encouraging the soldiers at the front and the Turkish people, but Yeats intended to lead them towards the national movement for independence through an event experienced beforehand. In this uprising, many of the insurgents were caught and executed (Dorny 2010, p. 48). Yeats memorializes some of them and gave their names in the last stanza. Thus, the concepts of "change" and "terrible beauty" are symbolical, yet this symbolical change will reach its aim in 1921. For, Ireland gained her independence like Turkey.

The other important difference between Ersoy and Yeats is that Ersoy is more of an activist than Yeats. He believed in the national struggle wholeheartedly and so he was directly involved in this struggle. In Yeats, however, this struggle seems more symbolic. He believed in the Irish independence, but, he did not take part in political struggles as much as Ersoy. He became a member of an organization that was operating for Ireland's freedom, but he was not so active in this organization, therefore, he got negative reaction from Maud Gonne whom he loved and other nationalist writers.

Throughout this poem, Ersoy praises the Turkish public and soldiers as seen in the second stanza in the line of "But smile upon my heroic race! Why the anger, why the rage?" and in the last lines of the third stanza as

I'm like the roaring flood; trampling and overflowing my dyke (weir),
I'll tear apart the mountains, fill up the open seas and still gush out!

On the other hand, Yeats did not use such exalting words for the Irish people and insurgents. He even criticizes them. For instance, in the first stanza, the persona meets the Irish in the sunset and says "polite meaningless words" to them and these words are meaningless. In the beginning of the second stanza, these lines criticize the Irish women and people who lived for a long time lack of national consciousness.

That woman's days were spent
In ignorant good will,

Yeats, unlike Mehmet Akif, supports cultural resistance against British imperialism instead of violent struggle. In this sense, Akif seems to be closer with the theorist, Frantz Fanon who put forward that decolonization is a violent process. Throughout the national anthem, this strong and challenging atmosphere created against the enemy demonstrates this situation. Unlike Ersoy, Yeats doesn't support verbal struggle, he believes that the struggle against imperialism should be realized by means of literature, which puts him in the centre of Literary Revival of Ireland. As Lloyd urges the expression "a terrible beauty" that passes at the end of every stanza excluding the third one is a situation that Yeats doesn't like. Lloyd suggests what troubled Yeats was that "this transformation takes place not through the intermediary of poetry but in consequence of violence itself" (1993, p.69). In this sense, Yeats and Ersoy fall apart.

CONCLUSION

In brief, the *March of Independence* greatly influenced both the Turkish soldiers fighting at different fronts and Turkish nation and representatives thanks to the emphases it made on freedom, unity and religion, and for this reason it has a very important place in the struggle for independence.

Easter 1916 of Yeats has a significant part in Ireland's national struggle and its independence. Though it is a symbolic poem, it gave serious messages to the Irish who remained connected to the English rule for centuries, thus in a way he helped them be hopeful about the future of Ireland. Similarly, Ersoy became a source of morale to the Turks who were in great difficulty because of poverty, hunger and diseases.

While Ersoy related the fidelity of Turkish people and soldiers to their independence, homeland and nation to Islam religion in a great extent, Yeats related the Irish people's nationalism and patriotism to their connection with their national culture, identity, folklore and literature. In other words, the reason why Irish people got into the act for their freedom can be explained with the Irish culture's and past's gaining importance. So, the persona in the first stanza draws attention to the Irish history and customary houses.

I have met them at close of day
Coming with vivid faces
From counter or desk among grey
Eighteenth-century houses.

Finally, both Ersoy and Yeats struggled against imperialism and tried to raise their people's awareness for independence. The states of both poets were at war with imperial powers during the times when these poems were written. Even if Ireland was not in a war as big as Turkey, the aim of both struggles are similar in that both set out to liberate from imperial powers' hegemony and control and to become independent. The main difference between these poets is the method they chose to fight against imperialism, as while Ersoy preferred a more active and political way, Yeats preferred to maintain this struggle via cultural nationalism.

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