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Nedim and His Beloved of Song

Nedim ve Güzelleri

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Abstract: This study focuses on the implication of same sex relationships and courting within Ottoman society through examples from Nedim's work. Striving to analyze how it was viewed and perceived at the time. It is argued that same sex interest, as well as how it was perceived within the society was intrinsically connected to the very structure as well as sensitivities of the society. Ottoman society did not deem same sex interest and appreciation as abnormal or deviant. This was largely influenced by the fact that, at the time in question, the modern binary categorization of sexual attraction as either heterosexual or homosexual did not exist. The general perception seems to have been that the gender of the sexual partner chosen was not indicative of one's sexual identity, or even indicative of the general sexual leanings of the person. In this sense one can argue that the Ottoman society had up until the nineteenth century a widely tolerant approach to sexuality in general, and same sex interest in particular. The choice of subject where the attraction and appreciation of the poet was concerned was affected by the structure of the society itself as well as the resultant role and place of women within it. Ottoman society was segregated on the basis of gender, thereby effectively rupturing relationships as well as day to day interaction between the two genders. This created homosocial environs within the society wherein the possibilities of experiencing courtship, passionate relationships, and thirsts satisfactorily seemed to have been limited to one's own gender. Perhaps the best reflections of these societal influences can be found in poems written on love and adoration. Here the aim is to explore this facet of society, the seemingly common acceptance of same sex attraction within the Empire, and how this love was presented in poetry, through Nedim's work.

Structured Abstract: This study focuses on the implication of same sex relationships and courting within Ottoman society through examples from Nedim's work, striving to analyze how it was viewed at the time. It is argued that same sex interest, as well as how it was perceived within the society was intrinsically connected to the very structure as well as sensitivities of the society. Ottoman society did not deem same-sex interest and appreciation as abnormal or deviant. This was largely influenced by the fact that, at the time in question, the modern binary categorization of sexual attraction as either heterosexual or homosexual did not exist. The general perception seems to have been that the gender of the sexual partner chosen was not indicative of one's sexual identity, or even indicative of the general sexual leanings of the person. In this sense one can argue that

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the Ottoman society had up until the nineteenth century a widely tolerant approach to sexuality in general, and same sex interest in particular.

Arguably reflecting the society, poets did not limit themselves to a single gender when writing on love and the appreciation of beauty. The choice of subject where the attraction and appreciation of the poet was concerned was affected by the structure of the society itself as well as the resultant role and place of women within it. The Ottoman society was segregated on the basis of gender, thereby effectively rupturing relationships as well as day to day interaction between the two genders. This meant that the feasting of one's eyes, arguably the first step in romantic attraction was severely restricted between genders. Thus the structuring of society made it extremely difficult to create an environment suitable for courting, romance, admiration, or flattery between genders. Courtship, passionate relations, and thirsts could mostly be experienced satisfactorily through one's own gender. One could argue that segregation was indeed at least effective in creating the homosocial environs that made same gender courting and relationships a more likely option.

These inclinations were also visible within poetry written on love and adoration and with the mostly homosocial environment, the subject was someone more accessible. The general assumption in such relationships was that the pursuer or lover would be an adult man while the beloved would be considerably younger. It was assumed that the boys would outgrow their desirability once they themselves became men, growing beards. Though relationships between adult partners were not non-existent. As it is, Nedim himself at times chose the adult male as his beloved in some of his more explicit Persian poetry. While Nedim was very clear at times on the gender of his beloved, most poems are one of courtship, adoration and admiration of a 'beautiful person,' the descriptions of beauty are at times ungendered. The result is an androgyny that defined the nature of Ottoman poetry.

In his *Şarkı* chosen here, Nedim focuses on a planned secret getaway with his lover, and their courtship. The courtship is acted out by two male parties, the wooed and the pursuer. The gender and age of Nedim's beloved are clearly indicated, a teenaged boy. Here, the atmosphere created is one of cherished love and an escapade, the gender of the beloved is not anything to be hidden or ashamed of.

Nedim's work has an abundance of instances where the beloved in question is clearly male, either boy or adult. He is also clearly outspoken and unapologetic when it comes to his attractions. With his realistic style, one cannot but read Nedim's poems in their own realistic context, and thus his works allow one a glimpse into the practices of the day, concerning the perceptions of relationships, courtship, emotion and love. That his poetry was presented at the highest levels of the government would indicate that there was no perceived aberration in these verses. As such he is probably the most suited to become a mirror for the society he was a part of and clearly enjoyed.

The changes would come fast from the mid-nineteenth century on, through 'modernization' imported from Europe which would bring with it clear categorizations of sexualities, as well as the introduction of shame and judgment where non-conforming relationships to the new heteronormative status quo were concerned. Sexuality in general would become repressed. Particularly the male beloved would start to disappear from the mid-nineteenth century on and society conformed to the newer imported categorizations.

Keywords: Ottoman History, Nedim, Divan Poetry, Same-sex Inclinations, Gender, Song.

Öz: Bu çalışma Osmanlı toplumunda belirtileri görünen eşcinsel ilişki ve ilgiye Nedim'in şiirleri üzerinden odaklanarak, bu ilgi ve ilişkilerin dönemde nasıl algılandığını incelemektir. Buradaki argüman toplumdaki bu ilgi ve ilişkilerin ve bunların algılarının toplumun yapısı ve duyarlılıkları ile yakından alakalı olduğudur. Osmanlı toplumu bu tip eşcinsel ilgi ve ilişkileri anormal veya sapkın olarak sınıflandırmamaktaydı. Bu duruş genelinde, homoseksüel ve heteroseksüel gibi modern ikili cinsel sınıflandırmaların dönemde var olmamalarından kaynaklanmaktaydı. Genel algı kişinin seçtiği cinsel partnerin cinsiyetinin, o kişinin cinsel kimliğinin bir göstergesi sayılmadığı yönündeydi. Bu açıdan bakıldığında Osmanlı toplumu on dokuzuncu yüzyıla kadar genel olarak cinselliğe ve özellikle eşcinselliğe yönelik olarak yüksek tahammüllü ve hoşgörülü olarak nitelendirilebilir. Şairlerin özellikle aşk üzerine yazdıkları şiirlerde konu ve odak noktası olarak kimi seçtikleri, toplumun hassasiyetleri ile beraber hem toplumun genel yapısı ve hem de bu yapı sonucunda kadınların toplum içindeki rol ve yerleri ile de derinden bağlantılıydı. Osmanlı toplumu cinsiyet aksı üzerinden kesin bir şekilde ikiye ayrılmıştı, bu ayrım cinsiyetler arası ilişkileri ve gündelik karşılaşmaları büyük ölçüde sınırlandırmıştı. Bu durum aynı zamanda kur, tutkulu ilişkiler ve arzuların yaşanmasını kişinin kendi cinsiyet

grubuna sınırlandıran homososyal çevrelerin oluşmasına da neden olmuştu. Bu toplumsal etkilerin belki de en iyi yansımasını aşk ve hayranlık üzerine yazılmış olan şiirlerde bulmak mümkün. Bu çalışma, toplumun algısını, eşcinsel ilgi ve ilişkilerin yaygınca görünen kabulünü ve bu ilişkilerin şiirlerde betimlenmelerini, Nedim'in şiirleri üzerinden incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Osmanlı Tarihi, Nedim, Divan, Eşcinsel eğilimler, Cinsiyet, Şiir, Şarkı.

Nedim and his Beloved of Song

This study focuses on the implication of same sex relationships and courting within Ottoman society through examples from Nedim's work, striving to analyze how it was viewed at the time. As poetry can be used to understand how the society as a whole behaved and perceived this behavior (Andrews 1985: 198). It is argued that same sex interest, as well as how it was perceived within the society was intrinsically connected to the very structure as well as sensitivities of the society. The primary aspect here is the fact that same-sex interest and appreciation was not deemed as abnormal or deviant within the society itself, even though religious law frowned upon it (Ze'evi 2005: 43). Here, one has to shed the modern binary categorization of sexual attraction as either heterosexual or homosexual, as these categories did not exist at the time. Heteronormativity as well as the categorization of homosexuality and heterosexuality as separate sexualities were actually imported from Europe during the mid-nineteenth century (Özgören Kınılı 2013: 393).

While the act and attraction surrounding same gender sexual liaisons indeed was known, the categorization was focused primarily on the active or passive role of the person rather than the gender of their partner (El-Rouayheb: 2005: 7). Similarly "the choice of sexual partner was relatively fluid and considered a matter of practice not identity" (Schick 2004: 87). This would indicate that the general perception was that the gender of the sexual partner chosen was not indicative of one's sexual identity, or even indicative of the general sexual leanings of the person. In this sense one can argue that the Ottoman society had up until the nineteenth century a widely tolerant approach to sexuality in general, and same sex interest in particular. As it were homoerotic discourse would be perceived as an acceptable social reality up until the nineteenth century (Özgören Kınılı 2013: 389).

The "ideas of beauty were ungendered" (Özgören Kınılı 2013: 388). This would argue for a more open approach as to what was deemed beautiful, as well as an avoidance of the rather common modern conception that what is beautiful is or needs to be, in a sense, feminine. Poets did not limit themselves to a single gender when writing on love and their attractions; their beloved could be male or female (Rowson 1991: 62), and here, one can perhaps find a reflection of the society itself. The desires "expressed in [the poet's] poetry were comprehensible within the society" (Murray 2007: 109). The choice of subject where the attraction and appreciation of the poet was concerned was affected by the structure of the society itself as well as the resultant role and place of women within it.

The Ottoman society was segregated on the basis of gender, thereby effectively rupturing relationships as well as day to day interaction between the two genders. A woman's "reputation depended on carefully restricted appearance in public, thereby rendering domestic space the normative space for women – at least for those who could afford it" (Peirce 2010: 105). Any meeting on the streets or out in public was limited from a visual point as well, as the veil was a constant companion once the woman left domestic/private space. Thus there was a definite isolation of one gender from the other (Silay 1994: 92). As such this deep segregation had tremendous effects on the social behavior as well as relationships of the people 'sharing' the society. It meant that the feasting of one's eyes, arguably the first step in romantic attraction was severely restricted between genders. The prospect of any cross gender legal relationship was limited to marriage and any interaction before or outside of the marriage bond was prohibited vigorously.

Even when marriage was on the horizon, women were not allowed to *see* their prospective husbands (Eyüpoğlu 1968: 30). And even after marriage, once the two genders were united in a household within the private sphere, the woman was cast as the lesser partner, be it from an educational point of view or general life experience. The societal division made the discovery of common ground and interest difficult, even when the women were sufficiently educated to the level of their male counterparts. Thus the structuring of society made it extremely difficult to create an environment suitable for courting, romance, admiration, or flattery between genders. “There existed an often expressed notion that true and open intellectual, spiritual, and erotic relationships were far more possible with a male partner” (Andrews 1997: 15).

“There was virtually no relation, no contact between men and women” (Eyüpoğlu 1968: 33). As women did not partake in society intermixed with men, this created two gender groups that rarely had overlapping interests or experiences, the norm was that marriages were arranged rather than build up by two interested parties. As such one could argue that relationships between men and women were not perceived as ‘relationships’ per se, but rather as bonds or contracts. This was mainly due to the fact that in the time period in question the two genders, especially because of the segregation, had no emotional ties to the opposite gender. Courtship, passionate relations, and thirsts could mostly be experienced satisfactorily through one’s own gender.

For men, women simply were not viable partners for passionate love, though, here it should be added that it was not only men that showed interest in their own gender but also women. Sources focusing on female same-sex relationships and courting are rather scarce, though they do exist. One such account is by Paul Ricaut, though most certainly gained second hand, it states that “this passion likewise reigns in the Society of Women; they die with amorous affections one to the other; especially the old Women court the young...” (1668: 34). Same sex interest and relationships thus were common within the Ottoman society. People from every strata of the society, be it high or low, religious or secular, displayed such inclinations (Bardakçı 1993: 84). One could argue that segregation was indeed at least effective in creating the homosocial environs that made same gender courting and relationships a more likely option. This may have been especially the case where the more closed-off social groups were concerned, the fact that the iç oghlans, those youths being educated within the palace were also watched by eunuchs, mimicking the harem, may indicate that relationships among the youths could have been a concern (Murray 2000: 55). Which in turn would indicate that such relationships were common enough that they had to be guarded against.

These inclinations were also visible within poetry written on love and adoration and with the mostly homosocial environment, the subject was someone more accessible. Women, as it were, were not really viable subjects for such poems, sometimes they were outright dangerous to write about. For a woman to become a topic of conversation or be visible enough to have become so, was perceived as scandalous for her family (Andrews 1997: 15). The situation of action, reaction, indication of interest, show of hesitation but curiosity, that is the game of ‘seduction,’ could only be played out in an environment where the two prospective lovers could actually interact, here women could not conceivably play an acting role, let alone be present. Thus “...what the Ottomans produced was a literature, a language, and a subculture of love that often explored relationships between lovers and beloveds of the same (male) gender” (Andrews et al. 2005: 21).

That even religious authorities themselves would pen such poetry or even compilations of erotica seems to indicate a general acceptance (Özgören Kınılı 2013: 389; Ze’evi 2005: 43). Born sometime close to or during the last decade of the seventeenth century (Andrews et al. 1997: 253), Ahmed Nedim himself was a member of the ulema (Gibb 1967: 30). He was under the employ of the Grand Vizier Ibrahim Pasha and would present him with a great number of poems (Mazıoğlu 1988: 9). Written in honor of the vizier himself, a poem generally titled *Hammâmiyye* sports very clear admiration and appreciation of a youth in the bathhouse; with rather extensive descriptions of the

youth's physique and beauty as well as the effect he has on a rather awestruck poet. The youth when questioned about his preoccupation mentions that he had made a promise the night before to bestow a kiss on a certain poet whose rendered verses had moved the youth extensively (Kutkan 1992: 11-21). While the poem veers of into a praise of the Grand Vizier himself, the fact remains that it is a clear appreciation of young masculinity and beauty. What was beautiful deserved to be appreciated.

These inclinations were also visible within the entertainment business; beautiful youths were employed as dancers. The 'Rakkas' (dancers) were chosen from among beautiful boys, given musical education and taught all the intricacies of Raks (dance) (Sevengil 1985: 84). At times the Rakkas would wear alluring women's clothing to further incite a crowd (Sevengil 1985: 85). As such it could be argued that the specter of the woman remained though the desired party would clearly be male, and, it seems, attainable. These youths, once they were deemed too old to attract the desire of their patrons, would move on to become trainers in turn or drummers (Murray 2007: 111). There even was a specific type of poem called *şehrengiz* wherein the poet described well-known beautiful boys (sometimes also girls but always from lower classes) from specific cities (Schick 2004: 89). Here one can assume that it would be improper to expose a girl or woman from higher classes in such a way. Similarly, these city boys were also from the artisanal or working classes (Perice 2009: 1333). Thus it could be argued that interest lay mostly in the appreciation of something beautiful regardless of gender, and with the rather impossibility of glimpsing women unveiled, there was the added influence of accessibility. Sufi mysticism and meditation on God, involved the contemplation of a beautiful youth as a reflection of and path to understand Godly love (Ze'evi 2005: 44-45), this platonic contemplation inspired its own range of poetic interpretations. Though it is important to state that it was always a beardless youth that was contemplated and never a woman (Rowson 1991: 62), this may have again been due to the structure of the society, and women being veiled at all times or a general inclination to perceive the contemplation of the male gender to be less carnal and more platonic than any such action towards the female gender, regardless of whether this was actually the case in reality or not.

"The primary idiom of same-sex love for both males and females involved age differences, between lover and beloved" (Murray 2007: 111). It was assumed that the boys would outgrow their desirability once they themselves became men, growing beards. "This does not mean that adult homosexual and homoerotic relationships were unheard-of or even that they were universally condemned" (Andrews et al. 1997: 107). Erotic collections would have chapters discussing "the urge of men or women ... to have intercourse with other adult persons of their own sex" (Ze'evi 2005: 43). While mentioned at times under the umbrella of *zina*, and generally specified as intercourse between a man and a younger partner, the law is also interestingly silent where the penalization of sex between adult males is concerned (Peirce 1997: 175). As it is, Nedim himself at times chose the adult male as his beloved in some of his more explicit Persian poetry, where the beloved clearly has his beard and is valued for it. Stating that "compared to a beard, the eyelashes and waist of the beloved, as thin as a hair, have no value" (Silay 1994: 100). And "From hair to hair, I consider every part of your body kissable..." (Silay 1994: 100), the presence of body hair, here, is very clearly indicative of a male physique.

While Nedim was very clear at times on the gender of his beloved, most poems of the time are one of courtship, adoration and admiration of a 'beautiful person,' the descriptions of beauty are at times ungendered. The hair, its shine and flow, the arc of an eyebrow, the lashes, the grace of the person are in general things that appeal to people, though they, in our modern understanding, would indicate a female presence. Here it is important to keep in mind that the concept of beauty at the time was ungendered in the period in question. The result is an androgyny that defined the nature of Ottoman poetry. Turkish, similar to Persian, is not grammatically gender indicative (Andrews et al. 2005: 21). This makes one wonder whether even while the language makes it difficult to gauge the gender of the beloved, the very same ambiguity of gender enabled and encouraged, to a certain

extent, the relationships and their expressions within poetry. It is however important to state that in most cases the poems describe locales such as bathhouses or public spaces that are very clearly homosocial in nature, and, as such, act as a clear indicator as to the gender of the people featured. Nedim himself is aware of the existence of this ambiguity and implied androgyny and plays on it is one of his *Gazel*: “Kız oğlan nâzı nâzın şeh-levend âvâzı âvâzın // Belâsın ben de bilmem kız mısın oğlan mısın kâfir (Mazıoğlu 1988: 140).¹ Wherein the very attraction of the beloved seems to be the very ambiguity as to their gender.

In his *Şarkı* chosen here, Nedim focuses on a planned secret getaway with his lover, and their courtship. Compared to some of his other works, the indicators of male adoration and same sex desire are rather more moderate, though clearly present. The *Şarkı* is made up of five stanzas, the fourth, which is of particular interest can be found below in the original language, the full translation of the work can be found below in the notes.

“...İzn alıp cum’a namâzına diyû mâderden

Bir gün uğrılıyalım çerh-i sitem-perverden

Dolaşıp iskeleye doğru nihan yollardan

Gidelim serv-i revânım yürü Sa’d-âbâd’a...” (Mazıoğlu 1988: 194).²

The *Şarkı* reads like an invitation to a romantic escapade; sneaking away and enjoying one another’s company, strolling around in a park, accompanying musicians and boat trips. It is very much a part of the courting ritual and romance. The courtship is acted out by two male parties, the wooed and the pursuer, the coy and the smitten.

It is the fourth stanza, rendered here, that specifies the gender of Nedim’s beloved. Only those of the male gender attend Friday prayer in a unified group (Eyüpoğlu 1968: 92). Here the societal structure would make it impossible for two of the opposite gender to attend prayers together. The age is revealed in the same instance. That the beloved needs permission from their mother to attend, clearly indicates that they must be a boy, possibly a teenager not yet of legal age (Silay 1994: 97). It should be stated that this very stanza is omitted from the *Şarkı* in Kutkan’s *Nedim Divanı’ndan Seçmeler*, there is no mention made about the omission in the modern translation included, nor any mention at all about the gender of the beloved in this instance (1992:167-168). Though the cypress as a descriptive also indicates a male beloved, as traditionally it was used to evoke tall stature (Silay 1994: 96). The interesting thing here would be that the *Şarkı* itself was not simply omitted but, if done on purpose, censored, especially in correlation with the fact that other stanzas in different *Gazel* and *Şarkı* that are also clearly about a male beloved or male same sex interest are left as is. One example would be the previously mentioned *Hammâmiyye* where the gender of the beauty cannot be disputed as male, the second one a *Gazel* numbered 36 in the collection (Kutkan 1992: 116), wherein the poet wishes to be down by the waterside, with a musician attending, and if only there was a coquettish young man as well, all of which are clearly stated with in the modern translation of the *Gazel* (Kutkan 1992: 118). In any case, in the *Şarkı* in question, the atmosphere created is one of

¹ “Your coquetry is that of a virgin girl, your voice that of a handsome man // You are the source of trouble; I do not know whether you are girl or boy, O Infidel” (Schick 2004: 87)

² “Let us bestow joy upon this heart filled with woe; let us go to Sa’dâbâd, my beloved cypress; here is the six-oared boat awaiting us; let us go to Sa’dâbâd, my beloved cypress // Let us laugh and play, let us enjoy the world; let us drink nectar from the newly made fountain; let us watch the elixir pour from the dragon’s mouth; let us go to Sa’dâbâd, my beloved cypress // Let us go, for a while and wander around the pond; let us later gaze upon the Heavenly Pavilion; Let us always sing songs and recite poems; let us go to Sa’dâbâd, my beloved cypress // Ask your mother’s permission to go to the Friday prayer; let us steal a day from reproachful destiny; going through the secret roads towards the quay, let us go to Sa’dâbâd, my beloved cypress // Just you and me and a nice, old musician and, if you permit, the mad poet Nedim, let us, today, forget about the others; let us go to Sa’dâbâd, my beloved cypress” (Silay 1994: 96).

cherished love and an escapade, the gender of the beloved is not anything to be hidden or ashamed of.

Thus it can be argued that this *Şarkı* is representative of how same sex relationships were both perceived and practiced out in the open within the society, or rather among the elite of the society. The expressions of the poets, their freedom in their writings indicates that such relationships were perceived to be common in the society (Eyüpoğlu 1968: 51), even acceptable one could argue. Similarly, even putting aside the rampant orientalism and moral judgment, many European travelers that visited the Ottoman Empire have recorded extensively on rather widespread same sex interest and activity among both gender groups within the Ottoman Empire (Ricaud 1668; Ze'evi 2005). This would indicate that said relationships and practices in general were not exactly hidden from casual observation, or deemed to be a source of shame, at least not until the mid-nineteenth century when Western influence started to gain ground.

Nedim's work has an abundance of instances where the beloved in question is clearly male, either boy or adult. He is also clearly outspoken and unapologetic when it comes to his attractions. In his words: "As long as I can watch the beauty of that rose (=the man), it doesn't matter whether the place where I watch him is a rosegarden or a bathhouse" (Silay 1994: 99). The locale once again a clear indicator of the gender of the rose in question. This, one could argue, goes hand in hand with Nedim's style which is realistic in nature (Mazıoğlu 1988: 13). As Nedim's poetry does not employ any hint of Islamic mysticism (Silay 1994: 94-95), one cannot but read his poems in their own realistic context, and thus his works allow one a glimpse into the practices of the day, concerning the perceptions of relationships, courtship, emotion and love. That his poetry was presented at the highest levels of the government would indicate that there was no perceived aberration in these verses. As such he is probably the most suited to become a mirror for the society he was a part of and clearly enjoyed.

The changes would come fast from the nineteenth century on, through 'modernization' imported from Europe which would bring with it clear categorizations of sexualities, as well as the introduction of shame and judgment where non-conforming relationships to the new heteronormative status quo were concerned. Sexuality in general would become repressed, works and texts on the discourse starting to fade. Particularly the male beloved would start to disappear from the mid-nineteenth century on, beauty becoming clearly feminized (Özgören Kınılı 2013: 390); and society conformed.

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