

Nostalgia and style: the life and works of Abdülhak Şinâî Hisar

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The past, for all of us, is the paradise from which Adam remembered that he had been expelled. This garden, blended with the soft faces and words of our mothers, and interwoven with the joys and desires of our childhood, frequently grants to our lives its flowers, and the harmony of its music, when it assails our souls with a fresh surge of its ancient power, creates a satisfaction whereby we understand that, in our hearts, the silences and sounds of the past as well as its sorrows and pleasures will always defeat the noise and feelings of the present.

Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, a notable writer himself, in his own essay on Abdülhak Şinâî feels obliged to quote these words from his friend, because of the latter's lifelong obsession with the days that are no more.¹ Taha Toros, in an essay on Abdülhak Şinâî, has a section titled: His Power to Evoke the Past, in which he writes:

Of those ancient families of Istanbul, and their lives of splendour that would grace fables of old, in short, from that ancient, magic atmosphere not even a small sample remains. That fabulous dome-like sky almost erased from our memories, those attractive views that haunted our horizons and those sentimental memories from times past whose embers lie smouldering deep within us are no longer there. However, the deathless works of Abdülhak Şinâî endure ... They bequeath and transfer a magnificent past, like majestic historical portraits with gilt frames, to generations still to come ... It might be said that Abdülhak Şinâî Hisar has saved the past from remaining the past, with his immortal portrayal of memories, each as priceless as a whole world.²

The above testimony of two well-known writers may be multiplied many times when the numerous theses and literary essays on Abdülhak Şinâî produced in the half century after his death are examined. As a writer, he hoarded the crowded memories and impressions of the first half of his life and elevated them into an art form in the second half. These two parts of his life were split almost exactly between the old, disappearing Ottoman Empire and the vibrant, emerging Republic of Turkey. Abdülhak Şinâî's literary importance lies in the fact that his novels and biographies, as well as his journalistic articles, are his personal efforts to ensure that the treasured language, culture and civilization in which he was brought up could be transferred undamaged and seamlessly, with panache, from a familiar past into the uncharted future. Whether in Turkish literature, politics or society, Abdülhak Şinâî was, in his lifetime, an important figure of continuity and stability in a turbulent and unhinged world.

Abdülhak Şinâî Hisar was born on 14 March 1887 in a large mansion on the European shores of the Bosphorus, not far from the huge stone fort called Rumelihisari built by Mehmed the Conqueror for his successful conquest of Constantinople in 1453.³ The mansion, lapped by deep blue waters, belonged to his maternal grandfather, Ahmed Muhtar Bey, who was one of the managers of the Royal Ottoman Arsenal. Abdülhak Şinâî came from a wealthy and distinguished family; his father, Mahmud Celâleddin Bey, was the publisher of several important Turkish literary journals of the nineteenth century,⁴ and his mother, Emine Neyyir Hanım, was a descendant of

the famous Tepedelenli Ali Pasha.⁵ She was also of a literary bent of mind, and conducted a correspondence with some leading writers of the time. Mahmud Celâleddin and his wife had two children, both sons; Abdülhak Şinâî was the elder, and the name given to him by his father was a compound of the names of two great poets and writers of the nineteenth century: Abdülhak Hâmid and İbrahim Şinâî.⁶ The second son was about four years younger and was named Selim Nüzhet.⁷ The intention in this article is to provide basic information on the life of Abdülhak Şinâî and to present an overview of his best known works, basically his three novels (which he calls tales) and his biographical memoirs of two great Turkish writers who were also his friends.⁸

Between 1890 and 1903, Mahmud Celâleddin was appointed Director of Education in Beirut. His wife continued to stay in the mansion of her father and only went to live with her husband in Beirut, taking along Abdülhak Şinâî, who was by then a boy of seven, in 1894 after the death of Ahmed Muhtar Bey. Necmettin Turinay estimates that this sojourn in Beirut lasted about two years. In spite of the shared literary interests and the children, husband and wife did not get along well, and were divorced later when the boys were in school.⁹ Much later, Abdülhak Şinâî used to attribute this separation of his parents to his father's inability to get his governmental appointment transferred back to Istanbul and his mother's reluctance to live or settle outside Istanbul.¹⁰

Still, that did not prevent the family from leading a life of considerable luxury – with mansions on both the shores of the Bosphorus as well as on Büyükkada, the largest of the Princes Islands in the Sea of Marmara that form part of Istanbul. Governesses taught the boys French and, in the case of Abdülhak Şinâî, the great poet Tevfik Fikret, who was a neighbour near Rumelihisar, also came for a while to give him lessons in Turkish.¹¹ As a boy, he remembers travelling like a pendulum to and fro between the mansion on the Bosphorus (which he calls Hisar, short for Rumelihisari) to Ada (island – short for Büyükkada or large island) where his paternal grandfather Salâhaddin Bey, a high-ranking officer in the Municipality of Istanbul, had his mansion.¹² After his father Mahmud Celâleddin's return from Beirut, Abdülhak Şinâî renewed his contacts with him, although as a result of his divorce his father had begun to live in a different area of Istanbul. Turinay gives a family tree covering a few generations of the ancestors of Abdülhak Şinâî.¹³

In 1898, Abdülhak Şinâî was admitted as a boarder to the Galatasaray Lycée in Istanbul – a famous high school that teaches primarily in French and is still regarded as one of Turkey's best educational institutions. The lycée had poets and writers among its teachers, and an atmosphere highly conducive to the study of literature and languages. Here, in addition to developing his writing skills, Abdülhak Şinâî also made many lifelong friends, including Ahmed Hâşim,¹⁴ Hamdullah Suphi,¹⁵ Refik Halid,¹⁶ İzzet Melih,¹⁷ Tahsin Nahid¹⁸ and others. Most of these classmates of Abdülhak Şinâî were to become writers of renown; a couple were also prominent in politics, and all of them were in the intellectual vanguard of the Turkish Republic established in 1923.

Seven years later, in 1905, without having officially graduated and even without informing his own family, Abdülhak Şinâî escaped to Paris like many other 'Young Turks' of the time.¹⁹ Here he registered at the École Libre des Sciences Politiques and began to meet many young Turkish intellectuals who had gathered around Ahmed Rıza²⁰ or Prince Sabahaddin.²¹ He particularly made friends with Yahya Kemal²² and Nihad Reşad.²³ More importantly, he frequented the literary salons of the Quartier Latin and made the acquaintance of literary figures like Maurice Barrès,²⁴ Jean Cocteau,²⁵ Anatole France,²⁶ Jean Moréas²⁷ and Henri de Régnier.²⁸

Some months after the 24 July 1908 'Young Turk' Revolution, once again without having taken his degree, Abdülhak Şinâî came back to Istanbul. Between 1909 and 1913 he took employment in a French construction company, followed by seven years in a German mining firm, both of which had business interests in Turkey. After Ottoman Turkey's defeat in the First World War and the departure of the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress from the country, Abdülhak Şinâî became one of the founders of the short-lived National Freedom Party,

