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BOSPHORUS MANSIONS

ABDULHAK SINASI HISAR

Important Terms

Allaturca Time A clock system in which people make adjustments to the clocks every day; each day, clocks are set to 12 at sunset, and the length of the nights and days changes according to the seasons.

Hanım It is an honorific for women, equals to Ms. in English

People

Nigâr Hanım Poet

Synopsis

In this work, Abdulhak Şinasi unveils how the mansion life shapes his inner world. The mansion life, intertwined with nature, gives him a poetic inner world. His inner melancholy inspires him to see the dying part of everything. Particularly the daily and seasonal transitions remind him of mortality, reinforcing his nostalgia. An important reason for this longing is that his childhood coincides with the last days of the collapsing Ottoman Empire.

Events

The Aristocratic Bosphorus

Abdulhak Şinasi Hisar perceives the mansions on the Bosphorus as living beings communicating under the water. The people living in these mansions do not know what nationalism is but have common values. Every year, children who start school walk around the streets by singing hymns. Councils of elders bring together young men and poor young girls for marriage. The residents of the neighborhood come to iftar without being invited once every Ramadan. Candy or money is given to children who pay respects on holidays. Eid allowances are distributed to the teachers, the firefighters, the postmen, the cleaners, and the poor of the neighborhood, in addition to the people of the mansions and the employees of the ferry company. Along with Muslim Fridays, Christian Sundays are also holidays. Since everyone spends time with their friends at home, except the small coffeehouses, there are no hotels, restaurants, patisseries in the neighborhoods.

The Mansions

According to him, mansions are not built with a mathematical calculation. They emerge like tendencies of a heart, diseases of a body, coincidences of a lifetime. He likens most of them to women with old-fashioned manners and an ancient realm in their hearts; their dreams do not match their reality. However, while passing by them by boat, mansions are no different from the palaces of *One Thousand and One Nights* with wide stairs and eaves.

If they do not have separate buildings, all the mansions are divided into *haremlik*, the portion reserved for the family, and *selamlık*, the portion for men. The kitchen and the rooms of the butler, boatman, and gardener are outside the mansion. The halls and rooms on the first floor are marble, while the ones on the upper floor are wooden. Most of the mansions do not have a road in front of them; they open directly to the Bosphorus. Some of the rooms facing the sea are above the water. Some face the mountains to the rear of the mansions. When all the doors are open, one can see the sea and mountains at once in the halls. Since each mansion is in a garden, the household enjoys colorful flowers on the sides of the mansions alongside the blue water and the green mountains. Some mansions are in a grove, and in a grove, an hour feels like a year. In some groves is either a pool or a fountain not to deprive people of the sound of water. Walls surround these groves and gardens, and a door in these walls opens to an old road.

Boats

The most suitable place for daydreaming is the boats, which are an essential complement to mansion life. They are more elegant than Venice's gondolas. Boatmen do not row while standing, as in gondolas, but sit across those in the boat. It is considered normal for him to sit across even women.

Most boats are orange, upholstered in velvet or broadcloth, cushions are red, cherry bruise, light blue, or brown. Rowers wear dresses in the same colors as the upholstery and the cushions. If the boat is reserved for women, a blue dress dangles from its back.

The way of getting on and off these boats is a tradition. While women are getting on and off the boats, the first boatman slightly raises his shoulder, and women put their hands on this shoulder to get support. Meanwhile, the second boatman ensures that the boat does not leave the dock.

Bosphorus people go everywhere by these boats, but the most memorable trips are music nights, called "moonlight." On those nights, when the moon rises, musicians and singers settle in a big boat, and the people of the Bosphorus join them with their boats. They stop at some points of the Bosphorus throughout the night and continue to listen to the music. Since men and women cannot be in the same boats, they appreciate these nights that help them exchange glances. These moonlit nights end with no outbursts.

Seasons

If a person lives in the Bosphorus by cutting off all contact with the neighborhood, that person opens their soul only to the beauties of nature, water, mountains, sky, and seasons. Abdulhak Şinasi says that most of the Bosphorus residents are unaware of the beauties they live in because they cannot compare them to distant places in other countries. As someone who has seen various parts of the world, he feels two things whenever he returns to the Bosphorus. First, he finds a taste that he cannot find anywhere else in the world in the spots where he spent his childhood. Second, he imagines himself under the roof of a family, feeling a sense of kinship with nature and the environment.

The Bosphorus offers the flavors of three seasons every day. It is like spring in the morning, summer in the day, and autumn in the evening. However, the beauties he experiences between April and November are unforgettable. In the spring seasons, the mornings are blue. The scent of flowers and the chirping of birds reach everywhere. In summer, silence falls. Everything seems to crawl into its shell. None passes on the street.

Boats and waves leave the sea alone, while clouds disappear and shadows recede from things. The Bosphorus shines like gold under the sun. When autumn finally comes, the days are either rainy or foggy. The shores, the houses, the mountains, the trees, and all the landscapes seem thoughtful. Everything seems flying away by detaching itself from its materiality. The sea spreads its scent more at night. When Abdulhak Şinasi calls a boat in the evening, the boatman does not ask where to go because navigating on the water is a natural need. For him, the Bosphorus means the sea, the mansion, the color, the boat, the wave, the wind blowing over these things, the smell, the lights, the shadows, and the freshness. It is the language of all these things appealing to the soul. Only painters can understand this language, but much to Abdulhak Şinasi's regret, they do not speak it.

Spending Time at the Mansion

In the mornings, even though all the curtains are closed, the lights penetrate the rooms. Every movement of the water is reflected on the ceiling. The maid serves the morning tea and the newspaper, and with the first window opened, a bright day fills in. Time flies when swimming in the sea, running, and playing in the halls of the mansion and the garden. And then it is lunchtime. Noon is followed by the poetic blue-tinged hours of the afternoon. The sun creeps towards the back of the mansion. Some evenings the weather gets even cooler.

When the clock shows twelve, the darkness increases, and the waters turn dark blue. The windows are closed, candles are lighted in houses, and grief descends upon the souls reminding people of their mortality. Everyone retreats to their rooms. Then the moonlight reflects on the waters like a poem.

Except for the place where wood and coal are stored between the boathouse and the kitchen, Abdulkhak Şinasi knows each part of the mansion so well that he feels its sadness and joy like a living creature. As soon as he steps in, he feels its embracing and completing his body and soul. Sometimes he can't even separate himself from the mansion in his dreams. However, he states that he realized later that everyone was waiting. Elderly relatives await the afterlife, the middle-aged wait for their unfulfilled dreams to come true, the young wait for the pleasures of freedom. These last days of the empire are never a thing of the past for him.

Boat Trips

Every day in the summer, men and women take boat trips separately in the afternoon. Children also join them. These trips starting from Beşiktaş and Uskudar continue to Kalender on the Rumelian coast and Paşabahçe on the Anatolian coast. They stop for a while in front of Goksu Pavilion, observing the surroundings.

Because of Abdulhamid's fears, the princes, sultans, and civil servants are not seen very often in these Bosphorus neighborhoods. They cannot contact people. Egyptian families, on the other hand, attend almost every recreational activity.

Most of the women in the boats wear a long coat and a yashmak, especially on Fridays. Men can see women in fancy dresses. Bosphorus is a meeting place for them. Over time, most women begin to wear charshaf and open their veils. However, it gives people pleasure to find the same things in their place on these trips every evening.

When Poet Nigâr Hanım, who lives in Rumelihisarı, does not accompany Abdulkhak Şinasi's grandmother, the boatmen bring the boats together, and the women start their daily chat.

When the allaturca clock shows twelve, the boats gathered in front of the Goksu Pavilion go into different directions like the grains of a broken rosary. On this way back, everyone is silent so as not to disturb the poetry of the moment. Even the boatman, who communicates a few rumors while rowing, is aware that it is time to shut up. The only sounds heard are the sounds of the paddles moving through the water. At these moments, Abdulkhak Şinasi feels as if he is intoxicated with poetry. While everything is in a state of intertwining and disintegration, the deepening murmur of the increasingly dark water fills his soul. As they are in front of the mansion, he, almost crushed by poetry, hastens to feel the compassion of the mansion and see its rooms with lamps illuminating its silence, his grandmother's clean face, and get rid of the magic of the evening. As soon as the boatman brings the boat to the quay, he collects his scattered self and rings the doorbell like someone asking for help.

The Taste of Life in Bosphorus

The mountains, hills, blue waters, and white clouds in the Bosphorus remind Abdulkhak Şinasi of maternal affection, the dreamy hours of his childhood days, and the pleasant times in the world. The most delicious moments of these days are when the evening ferries are getting ready to take off. As Galatasaray High School breaks up, he feels like leaving a dusty and sad world behind and entering a world of the blue, freshness, cleanliness, compassion, and beauty. A whistle blows, the latecomers run, those chit-chatting say goodbye and jump on the ferry, the vendors inside jump out, and finally, the ferry takes off towards the Bosphorus.

Throughout his life, Abdulkhak Şinasi cannot find the taste of these elements in anything. However, he also knows that he missed the best times of the Bosphorus.

These days, Europe is an unknown world for everyone except foreign officials. There is no cinema, beaches, radios, tea parties, dance nights, poker meetings. Thus, their only entertainment is the waters, boats, and the harmonious life of mansions. Abdulkhak Şinasi takes pity on the poverty of the days that pass in the city, with all kinds of pressures, without feelings. However, in those unemployed and lazy days of his childhood, every feeling has time to develop in the soul.

In the mansion life, no time is spared for the bazaar. Only the butlers are busy with shopping. Only men go to the city but not every day. The newspaper, *Sabah* is delivered daily to the mansion, but the master of the house leaves it in his room after reading a bit because women do not want to read the newspaper even though they can read and write. The magazine, *Servetifünun* is also delivered

weekly, but only the young master of the house spends time with it. Older men more often retreat to their rooms and read old books that others cannot read.

In the morning, taking care of the flowers, looking at the passing boats, resting after the meal, in the afternoon, navigating the waters, watching the sunset, in the moonlight, taking a boat trip, all these things refine the soul in the absence of books. Abdulhak Şinasi cries out that it is not possible to consider past people, who know how to enjoy life, ignorant.

The Mansion in Kanlıca

The mansion of Abdulhak Şinasi's grand-aunt in Kanlıca has unforgettable memories for him. Next to the *harem*, there is a large and well-kept garden with exceptional trees. This garden places the mansion, which seems to belong to ancient times, in a dream world at an indescribable distance. He climbs a few marble steps from the pier to the mansion and enters a large courtyard. There are many doors that Abdulhak Şinasi does not know what they hide behind them. On the courtyard's walls are engravings depicting scenes from the Bible, with French explanations below them. These are sad representations such as Joseph at the well, Sodom and Gomorrah ignited by the fire falling from the sky. Each time he races through this place and hops up the stairs. Upstairs is the most beautiful place in the mansion. The blue waters behind the windows of the two rooms whose doors are always open can be seen from a wide hall. When you turn left and climb a few steps, you can reach another wide hall at the garden level through a passage with windows. Abdulhak Şinasi does not think that any of the rooms with uneven floors are unusual, as he knows that all mansions are similar.

When they go upstairs, the old servants welcome them with joy. None of these women are married except one, and all cling to anyone who will ease their loneliness. Abdulhak Şinasi's family's visits once or twice a month are like a feast day for them. However, they do not have much to offer other than sherbet and sweetmeat.

Abdulhak Şinasi would rather be alone in the quiet sofas and rooms of the mansion than in the company of these women. These spaces crammed with furniture feel like waiting for something. And he avoids women to join the wait of these lonely rooms.

The Room with the Fountain

His favorite room of the mansion in Kanlıca is the one with a fountain. Opposite the room's door is a showcase adjacent to the conservatory on the left of the garden, and on the right side is a window overlooking the garden and the Bosphorus. As the upper parts of the windows are decorated with green, blue, and yellow glass, some parts of the room appear green, blue, and yellow. The fountain is in the middle of the room. There are cedars in front of the windowless walls. As in every room, on marble tables are gilded mirrors, colorful lamps, and delicate vases. According to Abdulhak Şinasi, these are not dull like memoryless items of an assembly line, but like flowers blooming in the air and water of the mansion. He wants to come to this mansion each month to retreat to this room. He believes that he is in love with the room, just as a person can't visualize the face they will love beforehand and love it only when they come across it. In this room, he sits alone, watches the fountain, the conservatory, the garden, and the blue waters beyond the garden. He imagines a piece of the past hiding under the fountain. He fancies himself as a king or a god with a developed emotional world. In poets like Chateaubriand, Barrés, and Proust, whom he read later, he finds himself in this room, shut off from the outside world and submitted to the world of imagination. So, this room is instructive for him as a master who introduces him to various feelings and desires.

Even though he thinks that women forget him when he shuts himself in here, women spy on him. As they see him sitting solemnly, they conclude that he is playing host and leave him alone. That's why each time he visits this mansion during his years at Galatasaray High School, they say, "Your dear room!" and he shuts himself in this room and introspects as usual.

Things

For Abdulhak Şinasi, things are more docile than animals, do not deceive us, and live a quiet life. The old ones are nicer, although not as useful as the new ones. As he sees the old items that fill the museums of every country, he gets excited, thinking about the memories they have accumulated and the people who used them. In them, he sees the faces, beliefs, meanings, and characters of ancient

people. We humans cannot go through the paths of life without losing our hearts to these objects, like sheep that get their wool caught on bushes while passing by...

Hours

Throughout their lives, people depend on clocks indicating the time of work, worship, and pleasure. At each sunset, they set the allaturca clocks to 12 o'clock. The clocks in shared spaces show the name of a clock factory in Europe, especially in London, but with Turkish numerals. Some hang on the wall and ring every quarter or hour. Others make a bird sound or play a song. Abdulhak Şinasi listens to these clocks as if hearing the sounds coming from the body and heart of the mansion.

The Rosaries

Abdulhak Şinasi remembers three rosaries that he used to play in his childhood. One is his mother's white rosary made of crystallized quartz that reminds him of the joy of holidays and being with his mother. Therefore, it represents his pleasures. The other is his grandfather's yellow rosary. He finds distance, solitude, and kindness in it and hears the sound of the wisdom hidden in the yellow-papered books in his grandfather's room. Therefore, this rosary represents his reason. The third is his grandmother's red rosary. In it, he hears the secrets of his fantastic plays and dreams, which he cannot share with his family, and the land of fairy tales that he listens to before sleep. Therefore, it represents his heart.

The Mirrors

The round handleless mirrors of women who want to look at themselves when they hear a guest coming or alone are hidden behind the pillows in a room facing the Bosphorus. As women look at these mirrors, Abdulhak Şinasi thinks that mirrors reflect the melancholy of past days and evenings, seasons and years, many souls and generations. For this reason, the most mysterious items in the mansion are these mirrors for him.

Nothingness

For Abdulhak Şinasi, women who beautify themselves as if they prepare for eternal life every day in the late afternoon for a boat trip face the ephemerality of everything when they are back, seeing that every beauty fades like a flower. Like artists, who believe that their works last for eternity, they believe their beauty will last forever, but as they see it fade so quickly, they seem to him to feel defeated.

One evening, after a boat trip, he stops by Nigâr Hanım's mansion to borrow a book and goes to her room. Before looking for the book, Nigâr Hanım looks in the mirror and slowly takes her yashmak off. While she is busy with her hair, it gets darker, colors fade away, the silence deepens, the waters of the Bosphorus visible through the window turn into a shadow, and Abdulhak Şinasi begins to think that everything will eventually disappear from the life. And he feels like embracing all his future joys and sorrows at once. He becomes convinced that life is a magnificent waterfall flowing to drain, something that is whole a moment ago but now disintegrating, and an odor and color that exist now but will disappear soon. As Nigâr Hanım unties her hair in the dark, he senses that everything in the world is falling apart and disappearing at each moment.

When he returns to the mansion with the book in his hand, he feels so tired of the pressure of this moment that his mother asks what happened, but he can't say anything. He writes that he can only explain this moment of depression as seeing nothingness but will never be able to define it adequately.

Sunset in the Bosphorus

In the Bosphorus, nature always seems to expect happiness, but as the sunset approaches, a melancholic atmosphere gets ahold of everyone and everything, making this wait futile. In the sunsets watched by swinging in the boat, all personal sorrows are combined with a natural and collective melancholy to darken. Sunset gives Abdulhak Şinasi a sense of disintegration, collapse, and death. On some cloudless days, the sun quickly recedes, and he cannot feel lyrical. However, he is happy to be freed from being crushed under his feelings.

Sunsets are sad times reminding him of past times. For him, although we think that every day is one of the ascending steps of our lives, every day we go down and decay a little more. All dreams will end like the day...

Visiting the Past

Years after leaving the mansion in Kanlıca, he gets on a ferry, where no one knows him or his family, to visit it. Although all the mansions in the Bosphorus seem aged, he thinks that they remain in their place like a kilometers long poem. However, he remembers how the Asaf Pasha Mansion was divided into two and likens it to a body cut by a surgeon. When he reaches the old mansion, he finds the road wider. The *selamlık*, which he never saw because it was rented, is still in place. When the dog in the garden yells at him, he leaves and goes to the remains. He finds some trees in the garden and is surprised that he cannot recognize these trees, which he met when he was a child. However, the grass and flowers are damaged, the marbles and fountains lie in ruins, and the mansion is a pile of rubble. He likens them to a body rotting under the ground; just as the skull is the latest decaying piece, the trees with deep roots are the ones to stay last, and just like him, they are the last witness to the mansion and look at its ruins with compassion.

Themes

Nostalgia Abdulhak Şinasi spends his childhood in the mansions of the Bosphorus when the Ottoman Empire is about to collapse. For this reason, a mansion is a symbolic place where his personal history and the country's history are intertwined. The routine of this place and nature, people, and things that keep that routine reflect the spirit of the privileged class of a closing era. According to Abdulhak Şinasi's account, this privileged class consists of people who act and feel according to the movements of the sun, sea, and sky during the day and know how to enjoy nature. In an age when there are no inventions like cinema, they are content with and refine their soul by what nature offers, unlike people overwhelmed by many burdens in city life.

Abdulhak Şinasi, focusing on the mansion life and nature alone, envisions a beautiful past. And while standing in front of the remains of the old mansion with the trees that he sees as the last witnesses of the mansion life, he mourns a generation living in harmony with nature and the parts of himself that he identifies with the mansion, which he perceives as alive and from time to time cannot separate from himself in his dreams.

Inner world Abdulhak Şinasi, as a person reflecting on everything happening around him, communicates his memories based on his inner world, not events. However, as a member of a crumbling empire, he always arrives at the same point; the horror caused by the fact that one day everything will end. He discerns traces of the past in the room with the fountain, the mirrors, and many other things. In the sunset and on the tired faces of the women whose beauty is fading, he confronts the horror of the nothingness that everything and everyone eventually reaches. He experiences all kinds of transitions around him by sharing the sorrow of the past people and feeling the horror of the nothingness that awaits him in the future.