

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
Muruvet Esra Yildirim, M.A.

## OMER'S CHILDHOOD

MUALLIM NACI [NACI THE TEACHER]

### People

Ali	His father
Fatma Zehra	His mother
Mehmet	His brother
Mehmet Tahir	His uncle
Celil	Family friend
Hadji Ali Efendi	Journeyman in his father's shop

### EVENTS

In this short book, Naci the Teacher, whose real name is Omer, tells about his early memories until eight years old.

#### *The Dog and the Man*

Muallim Naci begins to tell his memories by describing the neighborhood of his house. His cardigan with four pockets is his favorite because he can keep fruit and toys in its pockets. One day, while walking alone on Çelebi Street wearing this favorite cardigan, a dog appears in front of him. He screams as the dog tries to get hold of his chest, but nobody is in the street. Then, for a moment, the head of a man with a large mustache appears from a window on the mansion's ground floor, opposite the primary school on the street. The man says "Shoo" to the dog. When Omer finds a chance and starts running, the dog goes after him and attacks from behind. The man shouts "Shoo" again. Omer continues running, and after a while, when he looks back, he cannot see the dog. However, he realizes that the dog has torn the back of his cardigan. He takes it out and goes home and tells what happened to his mother. When his mother hugs him, he suddenly begins to cry.

Having told this incident, he strongly condemns the man who shouts at the dog from the window. He implies that he is helpful because he makes a sound to the dog but that he is heartless because he did not come to the aid of a little boy. As if that man was reading the lines he wrote, he asks, "Is your heart a dog's heart?" However, he states that even though he knows it, he does not give the name of this man and protects him partially, as he did to him.

#### *Father*

His father is a saddler who was born in Istanbul. According to him, which emotions a man who grew up in a decent Islamic family can feel, his father feels them. His grandfather Ahmet Agha transferred his truthful character to his father. His father is not an angry man, but going beyond Islamic discipline and being unkind makes him angry. Although he loves his family, he does not have an indulging attitude. He keeps the house under the influence of his majesty, but this effect has come naturally, not from his beating and cursing. He is hardworking as he does not want to be dependent on anyone in the world. He works in his small shop in Saraçhanebaşı. He does not want to buy a bigger house, hire a maid, or hire a concubine, although his earnings are enough to manage more than one house because he does not want to have a stranger at home.

He buys all the house necessities in bulk and never misses the nuts that children love. However, nobody can do anything without his permission at home. For example, it is not possible to go to the neighbor without his consent. He does not go anywhere unless he is needed at night.

On a winter night, when the guard passes the street, he announces a fire somewhere. His father immediately gets up and gets dressed, and goes to help because there is a friend's house where the fire started. His head is covered with snow when he comes back, and his whiskers are covered with ice.

### *Uncle*

His uncle, who lives in Bursa, comes to Istanbul from time to time, and he likes him because whenever he visits them, he brings some nuts with him. One evening when his uncle is at their home, he goes downstairs with a Chinese lantern to rotate his uncle's shoes so that his uncle can quickly wear them later. However, the lantern suddenly catches fire and starts to burn. His uncle, telling him to throw away the lantern, quickly takes him in his arms. He becomes embarrassed because as he tries to serve his uncle, he has committed a misdemeanor. However, his uncle is not much like his father. He is more casual than his father, and his father paid most of the debts he made while he lived in Istanbul. However, when his father dies, he owes only sixty cents to a man, although he has a few thousand liras owed to him.

### *Grandmother's Stick*

The stick of his grandmother, who passed away a month before his birth, stays in the corner of the house. One day, when his friend Nail from the neighborhood comes to play with him, they take this stick and go out to the backyard. Due to an argument during the game, he hits Nail's head with this stick. When blood starts to flow from Nail's head, their mothers come, and his mother reprimands him. When he looks for the stick the next day, he cannot find it because his mother has already burned it.

### *The Backyard*

Since his father loves to keep sheep, there are only one cherry tree and two or three cherry seedlings in their backyard, whose walls are covered with vine leaves. There are turkeys, ducks, and chickens in the coop. When the ducks disappear one day, they search everywhere but cannot find them. Finally, when his father comes home in the evening, he realizes that the backyard wall has collapsed and the ducks are under it, and he saves all three ducks safely.

He also has a cat named Hazelnut. He loves this cat so much that he ties a red ribbon around his neck. But one day, when his father brings a goat, he spends his days lingering with him in the backyard. There is also a tomb in the backyard. When his bird dies in his cage, he buries it in the backyard and puts a sign on it.

One day, when his brother climbs up the vines that started to produce grapes, he too attempts to climb up but falls, and his forehead is injured. That scar remains on his right eyebrow throughout his life.

### *Being a Guest*

He loves to play with Makbule, the daughter of their neighbor. One day, when he and his mother are at Makbule's house, his mother returns home without notifying him because their game absorbs them. After a while, as soon as he hears that his mother has returned home, he quits playing, and despite Makbule and her mother's insistence to stay longer, he immediately goes home.

When they visit their aunt in Topkapı, he gets scared whenever his mother leaves him alone. He doesn't want to stay in anyone's house and be a burden to anyone. He also notes that when he is a tenant, he acts responsively so that his landlord does not complain about him.

### *Meeting with Poetry*

One evening, while Celil, a family friend, is with his father, he studies calligraphy. Celil sees his work and appreciates his writing very much. Then, he writes a line and asks him to read it. Omer reads the line and likes it very much because he is introduced to poetry. What he reads is a verse from an ode written by the poet Tantarani for the Vizier of the Seljuk Empire, Nizâmülmülk.

### *The Hodja Effendi*

Omer does not want to go to school because Hodja Effendi beats them when he gets angry. One day he doesn't go to school, and the next day he doesn't want to go again, thinking that he can't explain why he didn't come the day before. When his mother grasps his situation, she informs his father, and his father tells Omer that he will drop him off at school and asks him to prepare. Omer gets ready immediately. After all, he is afraid of his father because a few days ago he saw out of the window his father come home and rushed out into the street and said, "Dad! What did you bring for me?" but his

father scolded him severely and said that he would beat him if he behaved so again. He doesn't know why his father acted like that, but when they go to school together, he implies that he is afraid of Hodja Effendi. His father then leaves him to his class after having talked to Hodja Effendi. That day passes without being beaten.

However, every time Hodja Effendi gets angry, he beats everyone's feet with bastinado. One day, while chatting with his brother, he learns about a plan his uncle, Tahir implemented years ago to get rid of Hodja Effendi's beating. One day, Hodja Effendi takes off his quilted turban, as always before performing ablution, and puts it on the handkerchief, laid on the row in front of him. After he is gone, Tahir puts a bird he brought with him under the turban. When Hodja Effendi comes and lifts the turban, a bird comes out of it, and he gets angry. As he sees Tahir laugh at him, he tries to beat him. Because Tahir has anticipated this, he tore the strap that is used to tie feet. So they cannot tie his feet, and Tahir runs away. After this incident, Hodja Effendi starts using chains to tie feet.

Some other day, Omer asks his brother to tell another story, and this time, his brother tells another incident. One day, while looking through the window, Hodja Effendi sees someone dumping garbage on the empty land opposite his house and immediately sends a few students from the class to bring the man to the classroom. The man is a joiner foreman. Hodja Effendi scolds him and attempts to beat his feet with bastinado. But later, because of the man's begging, he sends him back to the field with some students to collect the garbage and put it back in his basket.

When his brother finishes the story, he tells that Hodja Effendi demands experienced students to teach novice students to read Quran. As an experienced student, whenever he sits in front of Hodja Effendi with an unsuccessful novice boy, the boy cannot read the verse before him, but Hodja Effendi hits his shoulder. In the end, he can no longer bear this situation and complains to his father, but when his father speaks to Hodja Effendi, Hodja Effendi sends his father back, saying that he should thank him instead of complaining about it.

#### *Hadji Ali Effendi*

Since Omar's father is a person everyone respects, he is the chairman of the charity fund of the Turkish Islamic guild. Therefore, he has a wide social circle. There are sheiks and dervishes around him, but he is not related to any dervish order. The reason for his acquaintance with dervishes is his foreman Hacı Ali Efendi. Hacı Ali Efendi is one of the followers of Hamdi Efendi, the sheik of the Kubbe Lodge near Fatih. Since he is the deputy sheik of Helvai Lodge, he receives a weekly leave from Omer's father. Later, he becomes the sheik of the Black Turbaned Dervish Lodge. When he dies, he is buried there.

Omer's family, like his father, is not related to any dervish order. However, as they are very impressed by the Mesnevi, they feel most close to the Mevlevi.

#### *Varna*

He goes to Varna with his brother and mother when his uncle returns to Varna from Istanbul. They stay there for forty days, and during these days, they often visit the house of a person named Saddler Omer Agha, with whom his father communicates, although they do not know each other in person. This person is known for his righteousness. Omer befriends his son Süleyman.

When they return to Istanbul, he finds his cat, Hazelnut, neglected. However, he takes good care of him, and Hazelnut recovers right away. To his surprise, he finds out that the seller of milk dishes he used to like turned into a beggar after he lost everything because of his illness.

#### *A Reluctant Trip*

One day, a woman who is a relative comes to visit them with her son and daughter. She wants to take Omer to a place where she will visit. Even though Omer's mother says that she cannot do anything without her husband's permission, the woman insists and has Omer put on his best clothes and takes him away.

The woman goes to a mansion near Hagia Sophia with her children and Omer. They stay there for one or two days and go out together during the day with the host woman and her sons. When Omer wants to buy some unripe almonds, he loses them on the way. As he runs on the street in fear, he sees an

old woman and asks, "Take me to my mother!" and starts to cry. The old woman says, "How do I know where your mother is!" He begs, but the woman walks away. Then Omer enters a narrow street and sees the sons of the women; he cries and tells them he wants his mother. But that night, they stay in that mansion again. The next day, while the woman's son takes him to his home, a saddler rushes out of a shop and takes him directly to his father's shop. Because people heard that he was lost the previous day, and his father asked all the saddlers to take Omer to him whenever they see him. They go to Fatih Square together in the evening, and his father asks him to give money to the beggars. After a little more wandering, they go home. His mother is delighted that she can finally see him.

### *His Father's Death*

One day, when his father slaughters an animal on the first day of the Eid al-Adha, he suddenly feels tired and wants to lie down. When the doctors come, they learn that he has malaria. He dies eleven days later. Before his death, one day, he calls Omer to his side, caresses his cheek, then strips his dress to his elbow and says, "How thin." His mother replies, "Child." Then he asks for the dagger hanging on his bedside, takes it in his hand, and lifts it, saying, "I would like to be a martyr." Both his mother and Omer cry.

One day, when Omer comes home from school for lunch, he sees a crowd in front of their house. Moving forward, he notices his father's coffin. At that time, a woman calls him from the house opposite. They go to the second floor of the house and watch the crowd from the window. He watches until his father's coffin turns the corner of the street. Then the people in the house take him to another window viewing the sea to show the boats.

### *The Tenant*

After his father's death, they take a female tenant to the upper floor of the house. However, she leaves after a while. One day, on the way home from school, a neighbor asks Omer to take a woman home with him. When they get home, the woman starts asking questions about their tenant, hitting her foot on the ground. His mother, thinking that the woman is crazy, says that the tenant has moved to another place, and Omar will show her where she now lives. Omer takes the woman to a street, shows a house, and tells her that the person she is looking for lives there. As the woman moves toward the house, he runs away. His mother admonishes him not to bring strangers home.

Meanwhile, having realized that she was lied to, the woman comes back and starts punching the door. They do not open the door and wait until she leaves. And at the end, the woman walks away.

A year later, they move to his uncle's house in Varna upon his father's will.

## **THEMES**

**Moral Criticism** The first incident Muallim Naci tells is an attack of a dog. He criticizes the man who scares the dog from the window but does not come out to help. Although he does not give the man's name, as a retaliation, he leaves a clue as to who the man is since he starts telling his memories by describing the neighborhood where he lives and the street where the incident occurs, and the man lives. We see similar insensitivity in the woman who ignores him when he disappears and asks for her help. He criticizes that woman, too. Underlying this reproachful attitude lies a moral criticism. He points out what these people should have done by reporting their insensitive attitude. However, when he talks about his father and his father's friends, he emphasizes how helpful and sensitive they are. Therefore, he indicates how a person can live up to morality.

**Patriarchy** The only source of authority in the house is his father. He decides everything. For example, no slaves or servants are employed in the house because he thinks that it may harm privacy. Muallim Naci also mentions that his father sometimes scolds him, although he does not attribute his power to his intimidating personality. However, he legitimizes his father's decision-making authority with the good morality he says he has.

**The Culture of Punishment** All the stories Muallim Naci tell about Hodja Effendi illustrate that children live in a hierarchical culture of punishment. While Hodja Effendi, responsible for teaching how to read the Quran, positions himself above everyone, he divides children into novice and experienced students. Experienced students both undertake the teaching responsibility of Hodja Effendi and pay the price of the failure of the novice students. Thus, the school is an institution that

children are afraid of. Naturally, those who want to get rid of this stressful environment resort to some strategies like Muallim Naci's uncle.