

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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# MOONLIGHTS ON THE BOSPHORUS

ABDULHAK ŞINASI HISAR

## Important Terms

Bey	It is an honorific for men, equals to Mr. in English.
Haremlik	It refers to domestic spaces where both men and women of the family socialize
Selamlık	It refers to domestic spaces that are reserved for men.

## Synopsis

In this work, Abdulkhak Şinasi Hisar describes the Bosphorus he experienced in his childhood and early youth. The daily life of the Bosphorus, boat rides with musicians and singers on summer nights, and male-female relationships have an Eastern character that he used to belittle. But over time, he reconciles with all of these extinct customs. He writes his testimonies to acknowledge the unique culture of the Bosphorus that historians and artists do not appreciate.

## People

Ahmet Cevdet Pasha	Historian and legist
Ali Rıza Bey	Minister of Fisheries
Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu	Writer and diplomat
Ruşen Eşref	Writer and diplomat
Ismail Pasha	Khedive of Egypt
İzzet Fuad Pasha	Grand vizier
Said Naum Duhâni	Writer

## Events

### *Life on the Bosphorus*

The Bosphorus is an exceptional world with its customs like Venice. Every year, people living in Istanbul's neighborhoods move to their waterfront mansions when the season comes. The ferries of those who visit each other zigzag across the Bosphorus. Each day, the bumboats from Istanbul bring the purchases of the shopkeepers and the inhabitants of the Bosphorus. Sailboats come with seasonal fruits, winter wood, and coal. Other vendors glide over the water, praising what they sell in unique accents. It is customary to take a boat trip in the afternoon. On a moonlit night, a boat trip made by following the boat of musicians and singers is called "Moonlight."

### *The Bosphorus's Deprivations*

Abdulkhak Şinasi says that we need to think of the people of the past within their particular conditions and that we need ignorance, not knowledge, to understand the past time. In other words, we need to forget what we know about the present to understand the past. It is necessary to know what deprivations people experienced to apprehend the meaning of moonlight boat trips for them.

The people of the Bosphorus do not have the telephone to hear the voices of their loved ones and relatives. On snowy days, they are not even aware of whether the residents of other districts are alive or not.

They do not have foxtrot, tango, and rumba. And they cannot listen to music because they do not have a radio.

Since there are no cars, it is very challenging to go from one district to another. That is why people in a neighborhood always yearn for another one in Istanbul.

It is impossible to see women, as women are hidden. That is why there are no beaches where naked people are together.

There are no football matches, stadiums that excite everyone, and the habit of doing sports.

It is not possible to touch a body by dancing in musical environments.

There is no cinema to gather people like a shelter.

Men and women cannot travel together, even if they are close relatives. That is both forbidden and against the manners of Istanbulites. Those who do so are considered "provincial."

Except for foreign officers, none can go out of the country and travel to Europe. Even European literature is not known well.

Under these conditions, people live a solitary life on the Bosphorus. Their money and time are plentiful, but freedom and entertainment are limited. They are involved in two things; nature and music.

### *The Love of Nature*

Most of the residents of the Bosphorus move to Istanbul in winter and return in April and May. Everyone is concerned with the seasons, as the modes of transportation are primitive. All people feel the cold and the heat, and even the courts and mansions are heated with braziers. Life in the old houses does not separate people from nature; they enter their house through a garden and draw water from a well to water the garden, which is overflowed with scented blossoms. Cats sleep in one corner of the houses.

When spring comes, people who live in harmony with the grace and anger of nature are filled with relief. Afternoons are distinctive because people take a boat ride and watch nature. They smell both the flowers and the sea. When it gets dark, flickering lights start to dance on the water, and the Bosphorus looks like a lake. On some nights, women want to listen to the nightingales, get on the boat with their children and go to the famous places of the Bosphorus, where they can hear the sounds of the nightingale nests.

When summer comes, even the sounds and sights are overwhelmed by the heat. When the summer is over, the smells of the groves and the sounds of the waters become gloomy. Everything bids farewell, suggesting that everything has an end.

### *Music*

People seek sorrow in music and songs. Abdulhak Şinasi says that as people are always full of sorrow, music sweetens it. Music is the only branch of art that people take refuge in as literature is intimidated by the tyranny of Abdulhamid, reading is not a tradition, painting has just started to get rid of the pressure of religious bigotry, and sculpture is not favored. People welcome it in all areas of their lives. For example, the music teacher is accepted into the *haremlik* just like the doctor. Mawlıds are recited in tune. Kudum and ney are played in Maulawi rites. In some ceremonies, hymns are sung. Every neighborhood has street vendors performing with their beautiful voices. Every house has a musical instrument. Everyone knows people who know how to play an instrument or have a beautiful voice, and when they visit, they are offered drinks, and music continues until late at night. Neighbors who hear the sound send notes stating that they are pleased to be invited. In summers, on Fridays and Sundays, everyone listens to concerts in the picnic areas with places reserved for women. In winters, since there is no separate section for women in big coffeehouses, men, regardless of rich or poor, continue to attend these concerts.

A good singer is expected to know old music well, sing like a lover, be from Istanbul and be a good drinker. However, since musicians rival each other and cannot organize together, they cannot earn their living through art. Most of them earn their living by working as civil servants. But there is also a professional group of Christians known as "instrumentalists," who are paid well.

### *Moonlight Boat Trips*

Since it is difficult to get from one place to another in the city, the unique qualities of the neighborhoods are crucial, and moonlight boat trips are a great blessing for the people of the Bosphorus. June is early for the people of the Bosphorus to return from Istanbul, and as of September 15, the humidity increases. Thus, July and August are the ideal times for these entertainments.

There are unwritten rules for these nights that are known to everyone. For example, it is ensured that there is no other entertainment that night. The person who organizes the "Moonlight" rents a boat from his village for the musicians and singers and puts one man in this boat. This man does his best to make sure that everything is as his master wishes. For musicians and singers, he fixes raki, fish, and various appetizers. The news spreads to everyone. People learn who organizes "Moonlight" for the night. When the time comes, the boat takes the musicians and singers from the mansion of the organizer, and while the musicians are tuning sails towards Kalender Bay, which is the meeting place. Those who do not have a boat rent one for that night, and then hundreds of boats crowd around the boat of the musicians and singers. The owner of "Moonlight" never gets on the same boat with the musicians and singers, but everyone respects his right to stay closer to them.

Men decide in advance with whom they will be in which boat. Some drink a little raki at home before, while others skip dinner and are satisfied with a drink and some fruit in the boat.

Women have an exceptional style for these nights. A fancy dress dangles from the back of their boats. The family of the Egyptian khedive, who is Turkish, prefers to wear an unfitted full-length overcoat with loose full-length sleeves and light-colored veil, but most of the women are content to wear mashlah, a long, open-fronted cloak, and a headscarf of the same color. There are also women with black chadors.

Non-Muslims living on the coastline from Rumeli to Kurucesme and Westernized people living beyond Kalender Bay do not prefer to attend such nights. The statesmen also do not attend not to communicate with people, and clergy do not attend because they stay away from worldly gatherings. Yet, some foreign embassy employees join the crowd from time to time to see something "exotic."

When the music pauses, the boat of the musicians and singers sail to Yenikoy. Meanwhile, boats get closer, and women chat.

The musicians and singers perform near the mansion of the organizer's relatives because there are older people and patients in the mansion. Sometimes, after hearing the music, young people who do not know about the organization immediately get down to the boathouse and have their boats lowered into the water. Sometimes, the boatmen in the mansions call the maid to wake up the master, but the people in the mansions are mostly content to look out the window sleepily and listen to the music for a bit.

While the boats are moving slowly, some go ahead, and some fall back. When they reach a suitable place, the music restarts, and people, circled by personalities they like and dislike, continue to listen to it in awe, imagining themselves either in the past or in the future.

### *Love*

Men and women are supposed to be in separate boats, but no one opposes their boats standing side by side during the music. While the young men look at the young women, the young women have the boatman turn the boat a little so that nobody understands where they are looking at. If the men give persistent glances, the boatman usually takes the boat to another place to protect the dignity of the mansion he is attached to. These people, who love each other just by looking at each other, lose each other and find someone else to look at when the music stops and the boats start to move to another point on the Bosphorus.

The songs tell an alla turca style of love. For lovers who have no choice but to stare at each other only in the summer and outdoors, the autumn and winter seasons are like enemies depriving them of their lover. So, inevitably, songs are always about the seasons, the Bosphorus, and these "Moonlights."

### *The Unwritten History*

Although it is not known when the "Moonlight" organizations started, Abdulhak Şinasi learns from the elderly that during the reign of Sultan Abdulaziz, nearly a thousand boats participated in these nights, and the entertainment lasted until the morning. On some nights, on the terrace of the *haremlük* of Khedive Ismail Pasha's mansion in Emirgan, a unit consisting of about a hundred Arab and Circassian slaves sings for the Bosphorus. If there is "Moonlight" that night, the boats fall silent as they pass in front of the mansion. One night, while the sounds are rising from the mansion, a notification comes to the selamlık, the lights go out, and then the sounds suddenly stop. That night, the music is stopped by

Sultan Abdulhamid. Based on this information he learned from his elders, Abdulhak Şinasi states that he witnessed the last phase of the Bosphorus life, which was not as glorious as it used to be.

During the years he attends these nights, he finds the customs *alla Turca* and does not like them. Many intellectuals of the period think the same way. However, Abdulhak Şinasi regrets the unwritten history of the Bosphorus, stating that people learn over time how to approach such old customs in a docile manner. He finds the literature created for a defeated commander, Napoleon, astonishing. It takes a long time for him to realize that he is not a hero as he thought in his childhood. Thus, he says that anything that is not written disappears, so the Bosphorus culture vanishes like a past time without ideas and feelings.

When he researches people who write about the Bosphorus, he comes across four names; Ahmet Cevdet Pasha, Ali Rıza Bey, Yakup Kadri, and Rusen Eşref. The first two write in newspapers and magazines, Yakup Kadri describes "Moonlights" in one of his stories, and Ruşen Eşref in one of his books. In French works, İzzet Fuad Pasha and Said Naum Duhani mention these nights. Although Duhani writes that "Moonlights" were not held after 1896, Abdulhak Şinasi, as someone from the Bosphorus, states that this is not true.

Abdulhak Şinasi discovers much later that all these nights he reluctantly participated in touched him deeply. Finally, he decides to write down what he remembers. Otherwise, the only thing left from those days is nothing but waters without memory. But for him, the past is the only time that is uncorrupted. The songs of those nights continue to resound inside him.

He explains at length that we see the million-year-old light of dead stars and says that if living things with a more advanced civilization on another planet exist and look at our planet, they will see a past view of us, just like the stars.

## Themes

**Owning the Past** Abdulhak Şinasi Hisar deals with the past with the meticulousness of a historian and the romanticism of a poet. The Bosphorus culture finds its place in songs as a result of the "Moonlight" organizations. However, it is not represented in any other branch of art. That is what Abdulhak Şinasi regrets most. The Bosphorus is not adequately represented in books and paintings by the artists of the period. By taking into account the conditions of the period and how those conditions shaped people's souls, he tries to understand all the customs that he distances himself from emotionally because he finds them Eastern as people around him embraced with great ambition. The list of deprivations is a result of this effort. He compares the now-defunct Bosphorus customs to the lights of dead stars because he discovers that all those customs that he did not own in his childhood and early youth left deep traces in his soul. For this reason, his memories belong not only to him but also to a vanished culture, and he wants this culture to find its proper place in history.

## Bibliography

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