

## **Mehmet Rauf's Novel *September*: One of the first psychological novels written under the influence of Western literature and its critical analysis**

***Shorena Sultanishvili Gezdic, PhD candidate***

**Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University, Georgia**

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### **Abstract**

The scientific article aims to analyze the factors provoking betrayal and the origin of remorse and to present psychological portraits of the characters in Mehmed Rauf's acclaimed novel *September*. As some literary critics suggest, it is considered to be the first psychological novel in Turkish literature of the Servet-i-Funun period. The novel is written under the influence of literary tendencies dominant in that period. Therefore, the theoretical framework chosen for the analysis of the novel is Naturalism and Experimental Realism, which addresses different aspects of human lives, such as history, culture and social class. The novel bears clear features of Naturalism, such as objectivism, and a discrete description of characters and societies. The article applies the method of content analysis and critical study of the scientific literature related to the novel itself and the analysis of new tendencies in Turkish literature. Based directly on the novel's text, the article studies the reasons and the source of elusive marital infidelity, its impact on the characters, and the tormenting feelings caused by remorse. New psychological motives that appear in the novel *September* could be considered as an original phenomenon in Turkish literature in the period around 1900; Though the end of the novel is tragic, the characters of *September* are forgiven for their "misdeeds" as the death of the main hero purifies their sins.

**Keywords:** Servet-i Funun literature, first psychological novel, betrayal, remorse

## Introduction

The first psychological novel in the history of Turkish literature is rightly considered to be Mehmed Rauf's acclaimed novel *September*, which belongs to Servet-i Funun, five years in the New Turkish Literature (1896-1901). Mehmed Rauf (1875-1931), entered the literary arena at a time when the influence of Western ideas and aesthetics on Turkish literature was growing significantly. The novel's main theme, marital betrayal, gradually entered the plots of Turkish writers' literary works created under the influence of Western literature. Literary works are often united by certain ideas, among which religious, scientific, political, moral-philosophical, and aesthetic inspirations are the leading ones. The research aims to answer the question of how the theme of betrayal was introduced in Turkish literature at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It studies psychological aspects of marital infidelity, the Turkish lifestyle formed under the influence of European social and cultural life. The study is significant for understanding the stages of development of modern Turkish literature; besides, it appears as one of the first psychological novels in the Servet-i Funun literary period. The period of creation of the novel *September*, coincides with the era when the influence of Western literature on Turkish literature and art was strongly manifested, as in the case of Halit Ziya Usakligil, a 19th-century Turkish writer. A review of critical literature demonstrates that many critics and writers believe this novel was created under the influence of Western literature.

## Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach that involves content analysis, and critical study of the literary trends in Turkish literature of the mentioned period, drawing parallels between Western and one of the first novels of Western types. The novel is written under the influence of the literary trend Naturalism, but it also bears characteristics of Experimental Realism. Given that these theories address different aspects of human lives, such as history, culture and social class, it proved to be an appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis. The novel clearly features the trades of Naturalism as it implies description of people and societies, a long and very detailed portrayal of the characters of the novel, and of the state of affairs. Language scrutiny contains the identification of some literary techniques and methods of expressing the writer's attitude, such as metaphors and symbols. Quotations in the text confirm the accuracy of the analysis. It also involves a critical literature review related to the novel and the author. The article offers

a psychological analysis of the main characters, with a strong focus on the woman protagonist's emotions and spiritual experiences.

### **Historical perspective**

The 19th century in the history of Turkish literature is very difficult, but it is also the era of many innovations and changes. The novel belongs to Servet-i-Funun period which in Turkish literature is characterized by the introduction of innovations that led to the creation of literary works for an intellectual and aristocratic society. Also, it shows the struggle of generations for the homeland and a synthesis of Eastern and Western cultures, which was to create a better development perspective for the new Turkish society.

As the modern Turkish critic Rahim Tarim notes, the novel *September* was influenced by Paul Bourgeois's famous novel "The Sin of Love" (Tarim, p. 57). Another novel which was written before *September* was *Forbidden love* by Halit Ziya Usakligil, who created it under the influence of Western literature.

*September* tells the story of forbidden love which causes feelings of strong remorse in the protagonist of the novel, because a married woman falls in love with her husband's relative. The author creates interesting psychological portraits of the central characters. It is noteworthy that the theme of marital infidelity became relevant when the influence of European literature on Turkish writers was increased. The framework of the novels was formed, which became analogous to the Western novel, and the literary style was also changed.

It should be noted that it was a long journey before Turkish literature fell under Western influence; before, it was even unacceptable for the writers themselves to tarnish the image of a Turkish woman with betrayal or other forms of immorality. The Turkish writer and publicist Ahmet Midhat Efendi's (1844-1912) novel was published in 1870 under the title "Henüz On Yedi Yaşında" ("She is Only Seventeen Years Old"), which tells about the adventure of a 17-year-old innocent Christian Greek girl who, due to a twist of fate, becomes a prostitute. In the literary work, the author focuses on social and religious problems. He uses religion as a shield to ward off the reader's aggression: the author portrays the prostitute not as a devout Muslim, but as a Christian.

### **The plot and main protagonists of the novel *September***

In Mehmed Rauf's novel *September*, the characters' double life dramatically develops. The author gives psychological portraits of the two main characters, their spiritual loneliness, emotional connection, the emergence of a sincere, albeit forbidden love based on common values and beliefs, which is accompanied by internal conflict, the tormenting feelings

resulting from illusive marital infidelity - a twinge of conscience, death, and self-sacrifice as the only way to escape from any transgression and cleanse oneself from sin. Following the literary trends, the author proposes a piece of brief but sufficient information about the society, way of life, and economic or social problems in the novel. However, the story is focused on revealing the inner world of the characters, their thoughts or reflections, for which a method of dialogue is often used. The main idea is often conveyed through the protagonists' flow of consciousness and conversations between them. The central character of the novel is Suad, a caring and faithful wife married to her husband Sureya with love. But after five years of living together, the woman discovers that the lack of attention to her and the incompatibility between her and her husband's interests have caused a rift in their relationship. The dialogue between the husband and wife presented at the beginning of the novel, initially convinces the reader of Sureya's sincere feelings towards Suad, "I understand how much I love you better when I see other women, [...] and it is then that I swear to myself that I can never love any of them as much as you..." (Rauf, 2013:09). However, the love between the husband and wife in the novel does not develop. Suad is a talented, wealthy, intelligent, compassionate and well-brought-up person with a rich inner world, and she is full of life and love. Because of an unsuccessful marriage, she falls in love with her husband's cousin. Suad's physical beauty reaches perfection through synthesis with her spiritual world. The writer describes her in a highly aesthetic way. "When she smiled, the all-encompassing smile scattered across her face and revealed her huge and pure soul, which was so free, delightful and wholesome that it made Suad a unique and special woman from all others" (Rauf, 2013:183). The author highly praises Suad's physical beauty, adorned with dignity, restraint, kindness, and courtesy, which harmoniously blends with her spiritual beauty.

As the novel *September* is considered the first psychological novel in Turkish literature, the author has conveyed Suad's inner world in depth and detail, thus openly presenting her psychological portrait to the reader. Sureya, Suad's husband, is a melancholic person, who mostly concentrates on his interests and is constantly dissatisfied. He is bored with his monotonous life and lacks responsibility. He is far from aesthetics or art, but at the same time, he is a mischievous and innocent person. It is important that, against the background of Suad, Sureya's character, his psychological portrait, and even his inner world, are conveyed quite sparingly. It seems that this is a literary method chosen by the author to depict the emptiness and the difference in interests between the couple more acutely.

Nejib, Sureya's cousin, is a young, handsome man under thirty with refined manners and a deep, sophisticated perception of aesthetics. This character appears in the novel as the one who awakens Suad's femininity

buried deep in her rich, noble soul, silenced by Sureya and his monotonous, faded marriage with her. Although Nejib has an image of a person who enjoys life, in his heart, he suffers from a lack of true love. Through the naive friendship that begins, Nejib discovers and awakens Suad's dormant, rich, inexhaustible inner world, and in the process, he falls head over heels in love with her. At first, Nejib is convinced that Suad is no different from those women he has been in relationships with so far; He doubts that this marriage can be as flawless as it seems from the outside. It is these suspicions that become the main reason for his interest in Suad. In the conversations between Nejib, Suad, and Sureya, the writer demonstrates the fundamental difference in the characters' opinions and views on almost all topics, which is especially evident in matters related to relationships with women and marriage. Nejib is one of those characters whose inner world, beliefs, and attitudes are revealed in his relationship with Suad. If for Sureya, women in general are not very appreciated, in Nejib's opinion, the life of any man without a woman would resemble a barren desert. Nejib has a more enlightened and high opinion of women and their essence in general. "Do you know what amazing women are like? Pure, unblemished souls!" he says (Rauf, 2013:59). With these words, he urges Sureya to appreciate Suad, because with his not-so-favorable and pure love experience, such women are rare, if not impossible to find at all.

After Nejib falls in love with Suad, conflicting feelings arise, and he struggles with himself. However, he cannot confront the strong and pure feelings he experiences for Suad; He feels a strong repentance and considers himself unworthy, devoid of any morality. Nejib constantly experiences the pangs of conscience. He is a character who is captive to his soul and feelings. Nejib's observation of the life of a married couple begins after he decides to spend some time with the couple in a rented villa on the Bosphorus. "When he saw the whispering couple walking in front of him in such a charming, wonderfully fragrant environment, he felt a devastatingly strong, avid desire in the depths of his soul to experience a true happiness that only a direct relationship with a woman could bring, and what his life lacked so much" (Rauf, 2013:78). Nejib acknowledges his unhealthy thoughts and realizes that he is a captive of false ideas. For him, there was no feeling more painful than disrespect for himself. Devastated by fear of himself and the darkness of his soul, he would say: Oh, how murky and unrecognizable I am! At that time the two conflicting thoughts, two personalities within him would appear, one—pure as flowing water, but the other mostly soaked in blood and tainted with dirty feelings, it was the latter that awakened the voice of conscience, which constantly called him a monster" (Rauf, 2013:79). Nejib constantly experiences a tormenting pang of conscience, caused by his thoughts; he considers it a kind of treason to be jealous of the harmonious relationship between Suad and Sureya.

In the novel, the origin and development of forbidden love between the couple is based on spiritual unity and the coincidence of interests. As mentioned above, Suad's interests and passion for art and aesthetics are constantly sacrificed to the needs and happiness of her husband. This situation is changed by the appearance of Nejib in the novel. The author introduces music as the main power that unites the feelings of Suad and Nejib. Music, according to Plato, gives the world the soul, the mind, wings, and the ability to fly for human fantasies and life. In their attitude towards music, the author clearly shows the difference between Nejib and Sureya. For Sureya, music is boring, and listening to it is unbearable! Nejib and Suad believe that there is nothing in this world as inspiring as music and that it can even nourish the human soul. "And then music took on a completely different meaning, it appeared to him as an echo of the soul and a balm for the heart" (Rauf, 2013:63). Music and the piano is considered a powerful therapeutic tool, a healing power that appears as the balm, a recovery for the souls of Suad and Nejib, the only way to save them from a life devoid of pure emotions and feelings.

Suad's character is in a constant struggle with herself, so as not to deviate even a little from ethical norms, and at the same time get spiritual nourishment and life enjoyment from one of the highest expressions of aesthetics, music. Suad experiences spiritual pain caused by the pangs of conscience and is firmly determined not to deviate from the norms that society imposes on married women. Music symbolizes a completely inspiring, pure feeling based on a spiritual connection between Suad and Nejib, which is far from erotic passion and affection. Nejib loves Suad's pure soul, which makes her so superior in his eyes.

It is noteworthy that we do not find any religious suggestions throughout the novel, there is no mention of any religious ritual. The pangs of conscience that Nejib and Suad constantly experience are caused not by deviating from specific religious dogmas, but by breaking the framework of purely human, ethical norms. Suad and Nejib's forbidden love is devoid of any physical connection or human passions. They cannot fully express their feelings, not only to each other, but even to themselves, and every thought about this relationship causes them incredible spiritual pain. "He never thought of betrayal; Because he did not act based on carnal passions, he could not resort to dirty ways to satisfy his desires, [...] he would never allow this love of his to happen" (Rauf, 2013:125). The stronger Suad and Nejib's love develops, the more robust the struggle with themselves and their conscience becomes until they reveal their feelings for each other at the end of the novel. They try to find a way out of the situation. However, the enjoyment of forbidden love is still weighed down by the responsibilities and moral frameworks imposed on them. To Nejib's proposal to forget everyone and



everything and dedicate the rest of their lives only to each other, Suad responds as follows: "No, Nejib, no! It seems to me that we have no right to demand so much from each other, [...] I will not forget the existence of Sureya, so that you know how I pity him, Nejib"... (Rauf, 2013:322). For Suad and Nejib, love is like a merciless monster that constantly confronts all their attempts to find a way out of bitter reality. During their final farewell, Nejib touches Suad's hand for the first and last time and kisses her on the eyes and hands, at which point the author notes that this fact causes a "rebellion" of dignity in Suad, although the all-encompassing feeling of love turns her into a weak and helpless creature.

Love sacrificed in exchange for loyalty and dignity appears once again in the tragic ending of the novel. Suad remains alone in the burning tower, she does not even seem to fight for her life, because she has no reason to fight. As for Sureya and Nejib, it seems that both of them are ready to save Suad, although after a few seconds of hesitation upon seeing the burning room, only Nejib is able to do so, while Sureya runs away in a panic. In his heroic deed to save the life of his beloved, Nejib also departs his life.

## **Discussion**

### **Critical analysis of the novel**

Recognized as the first psychological novel in Turkish literature, *September*, belongs to a very important period in the history of Turkish literature, the Servet-i Funun period, which can be considered one of the turning points in the development of the novel as a literary genre. It is indeed at this time that the Turkish novel acquired an individual character and became a means of expressing and exploring social existence, human relationships, and emotions. The novel is well-structured and plot-oriented.

The Servet-i Funun literary movement marked a significant departure in Turkish literature, as its proponents eschewed the didactic and informational objectives that had previously characterized the transfer of subject matter into the Turkish literary sphere. Central to their artistic philosophy was the principle of "l'art pour l'art" (art for art's sake), wherein the intrinsic aesthetic value of literary creation superseded any utilitarian or pedagogical concerns. The paramount aspiration underpinning this artistic paradigm was the cultivation of a corpus of Turkish literature capable of rivaling the esteemed works of French literary tradition. (Atalay:215) To this end, practitioners of the Servet-i Funun period deliberately emulated the stylistic and thematic conventions of prominent French realist and naturalist authors.

Within this intellectual milieu, Halit Ziya Usakligil emerged as a pivotal figure, credited with imbuing Turkish narrative fiction - both short stories and novels - with a distinctly Western aesthetic. His literary output is

demonstrably grounded in the tenets of realism and naturalism. Similarly, Mehmet Rauf, recognized as the second most influential novelist of the Servet-i Funun era after Usakligil, authored the seminal novel *September*. This work is particularly noted for its profound engagement with, and assimilation of, the literary techniques and philosophical underpinnings of French realism and naturalism, thereby reflecting the overarching artistic objectives of the period. Professor Ali Ihsan Kolcu disagrees with the assumption that *September* is considered the first psychological novel in the history of Turkish literature; He also notes that the forbidden love story between the couple does not develop throughout the novel and cannot move from one dimension to another, therefore, it can be considered a weak point of the novel. He also suggests that the love between Nejib and Suad is so similar to that described in Divan literature that the novel is a caricature of it. “Apart from the scenes of falling in love without expressing their feelings to each other, then reconciling again, and general words of love, we almost do not find emotionally charged plots in the novel” (Kolcu, 2013:350).

It is quite possible to share this critical opinion regarding the fact that there are no psychologically strong and charged episodes in the novel, however, it is impossible to deny that the writer manages to create psychological portraits of the characters with great success, penetrates the depths of their souls, and brings hidden feelings to the fore for the reader, which is often demonstrated in conversations between the characters and their monologues.

In the novel, the spiritual metamorphosis of the heroes can be traced: their awakening and reassessment of values, their struggle with their own inner world, and the struggle of the subconscious and the conscious. Thus, it can be assumed that *September* can be considered the first Turkish psychological novel.

From a linguistic point of view, the novel is quite fluent, however, it should be noted that due to the heavy vocabulary characteristics of the Servetus-Funun period, it is almost impossible to understand for lower and middle-class readers, because of this, it was necessary to linguistically simplify and republish literary works after a certain period of time, and novel *September* was first published in 1900, and again, later, in a more simplified language.

One of the strong sides of the novel is that the writer adapted the language to the characters according to their age, social status, gender, and mood. The vocabulary used in the text is also important. It repeats the heavy style characteristic of the Servet-i- Funun period and is loaded with Persianisms and Arabisms to such an extent that it is difficult to understand the novel's artistic side of the language without simplification (Mahfuz, Zaric Pdf:538). As for the form, the novel is truly a novelty for Turkish literature,



because this is one of the first examples of a Western type of voluminous novel, with all components of a dramatic plot that develops and culminates at the end of the novel.

In the novel *September* we see the influence of the main trends in Western literature and art in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It rejected existing reality and was characterized by individualism, formalism, and pessimism.

The novel has a banal sentimental plot characteristic of late romanticism, traces of Western literature are felt, as well as a struggle between the *Alaturca* and *Alafranga* approaches in the perception of culture. The novel also indicates that large patriarchal families, where several generations live together, are no longer attractive. The traditional patriarchal tower of the father's house, where the couple spends every summer together, is already boring and unbearable for Sureya. He dreams of escaping the monotonous environment and moving to a villa overlooking the Bosphorus, where he will spend the summer with his wife and enjoy life, but this remains an unattainable goal for him until Suad rents the desired villa with money secretly borrowed from her father. The author refers to the economic problems of social classes.

The European touch is strongly felt, not only in the kind of disruption of the traditional Turkish family structure and the separation of the couple, but also in the description of the villa and the conditions where the couple temporarily moves to live. The writer, who does not spend much time in the novel describing the environment, provides us with detailed information about the new residence. It is a villa by the sea, bright and clean as if it were cast from ivory. A different aura and style than the family tower that Sureya compares to hell. The piano, one of the most visible instruments of Western culture, gives this house a special touch, and throughout the novel, it completely changes the daily routine. If before, the echo of Turkish traditional views was clearly visible in the father's house, where after dinner all the family members gathered together, the women were busy with needlework, and the men were busy with tea and dialogue, now Suad's conversations about Western music and the melodious sounds of the piano are heard instead. The new lifestyle is marked by the traces of the new Western culture. Western classical music runs throughout the novel as a kind of background and appears almost as an independent character. It is an important means of demonstrating the influence of Western culture and, at the same time, bringing Suad and Nejib closer together. It is precisely the conversations that start with music that help them discover common interests and get to know each other's spiritual world.

With the help of music, Suad forgets the ugly reality and everyday life in which she has to live. At that time, music occupied a rather significant place in aristocratic circles. Western music was especially important for admirers of

art and aesthetics. It is noteworthy that Suad is well acquainted with pieces of Western classical music and their representatives. The novel mentions musical masterpieces such as the famous Spanish waltz "Gran Via", "Faust Waltz", "Rigoletto's March", "La Traviata", "Aida" and others. Among the world-class figures, the names of Christoph Gluck, Haydn, and Beethoven are mentioned. Thus, it can be assumed that the characters of Suad and Nejib have quite sophisticated musical tastes. Like Suad, Nejib is also passionate about music, knows it quite well, and finds true happiness through communication with music. Both Nejib and Suad find relief and salvation from worldly vanity in music.

One of the symbols introduced by the writer in the novel is Suad's glove, which is a literary method of tying the knot and reaching the climax. The glove is a non-verbal means of expressing feelings and can also be considered an echo of the influence of Western literature. The use of symbols such as a glove, a woman's handkerchief, a fan, and a flower was relevant for Western-type artistic works. Considering the entire plot of the novel, we can assume that it reflects a kind of turning point in the Turkish public worldview. At that time, the fading of traditional Turkish values occurred and the changes that inevitably appear in the future are evident. It is as if the spiritual changes expressed in Suad, as a sentimental female character, her metamorphosis, are the beginning of a completely different path, one that leads to freedom, independence, and Western development.

## Conclusion

In the novel *September*, the author conveys in detail the spiritual world of the characters and their feelings. The writer does not reduce the forbidden love to the level of physical betrayal. The feelings portrayed by Mehmed Rauf are based on a spiritual connection between the two, which gives moral and spiritual stature to the characters. Betrayal at the level of thought and feeling, tormenting remorse, a constant struggle with oneself, feelings and emotions, self-sacrifice and victory are the issues that a reader encounters in the novel. The manifestation of the rare spiritual aptitude of the characters of the novel is to overcome betrayal, but at the same time, remain honest and faithful to forbidden love.

Prioritizing close interaction between the characters and nature, Naturalism, on the other hand disregards the role of fiction narrative, while Servet-i Funun uses rich and rather complex literary language, which was incomprehensible for the broad masses at that time. Experimental realism addresses different aspects of human lives, such as history, culture and social class; all these themes are well presented in the novel. Therefore, the novel echoes the historical changes within the society, affecting its economic, social and moral aspects.

One of the main characteristics of the literature of Servet -i Funun is a tragedy, which is often found in the novels of this period. It is not surprising that Suad remains alone in the burning tower, where she seems to be waiting passively to be “purified” by the flames of fire and Nejib shares the solemn fate of Suad. Thus, at the end of the novel, the characters who disappeared in the flames, sacrifice themselves to love. Considering that in the tragic novels of the mentioned literary period, death is assigned the function of atonement for sin and, in a way, a purifier of sins, in the eyes of an empathetic reader, the characters of the novel *September* are forgiven for their “misdeeds”.

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