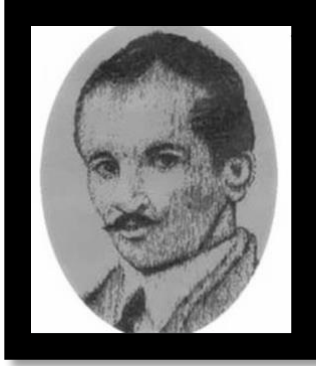


Ömer Seyfettin

- Ömer Seyfettin brief author bio
- “Kesik Bıyık,” Ottoman Original (1918) With gratitude to the Milli Kütüphane Arşivi
- Translated by Roberta Micallef

Prepared for Artichoke by Roberta Micallef



Ömer Seyfettin also spelled Seyfeddin (1884-1920)

Born in Göhen, Bandırma, joined the Ottoman army after studying in military schools. After taking part in the Balkan Wars (1912-1913), he settled in Istanbul where he devoted himself to teaching literature and writing. He was a popular author whose works drew on his own personal experiences.

Original from Milli Kütüphane Arşivi,

<https://dijital-kutuphane.mkutup.gov.tr/tr/periodicals/catalog/issue/24728>



A translation of Kesik Bıyık by Ömer Seyfettin which was first published on October 31, 1918 in Diken, year 1, issue 4, page 6. Translated by Roberta Micallef in honor of Erika Gilson with whom she shares an interest in translation.

American Style Mustache

One should believe the man called Darwin. Yes. People are definitely descendants of monkeys. Because whatever we see we imitate immediately; sitting, getting up, drinking, walking, giving birth in sum, everything, everything...

So many men wear that corrective lens we call a “monocle” when it’s not needed at all. Because they see them in the fashion magazines they look at while at the tailor.

Anyway... let’s not turn this into a long story. I too am nothing but an imitator. I follow every fashion. Six seven years ago I saw that everyone trimmed their moustaches in the American fashion, and as you might guess I did the same thing immediately. Oh yes, really, I too had my walrus mustache trimmed simply to imitate fashion. Just like Darwin wanted, I really looked like my ancestors.

I cannot describe how embarrassed I was at first. I went home via the backroads so I wouldn’t run into anyone I knew. When the servant girl¹ who opened the door saw me like this she screamed in terror. With the excitement of a mare that had seen a wolf she ran away shrieking at the top of her lungs. I pushed the door open, and climbed up the stairs. Who knows what the wicked girl had told my mother. My mother came to my room. I was clutching my mouth as if I had a toothache, and did not let my mustache show.

“Oh you lowly traitor! You are no longer my child!” She said. She was sobbing. Her poor pale hands were shaking. Her heart was beating so violently that she had to take deep, deep breaths, which made her chest and head heave.

¹ The word the author used in the Ottoman and other Turkish versions of the text that I have read is “evlatlık.” A term described by Hande Togrul Keklik as female, unpaid domestic workers who may or may not be distantly related who enter the family as children. While they might be described as pseudo sisters or daughters they lack the legal rights that family members have. See: Keklik, Hande Togrul, “‘As If She Is Family’: The Marginalisation of Unpaid Household Workers in Turkey.” *Gender and Development*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2006, pp. 191–198. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/20461135. Accessed 24 Jan. 2021.

“Why mom?” I asked.

“Why? You ask why?” She moaned, “what about your mustache?”

“Why should trimming my mustache make me a lowly person or a traitor?”

My mother started crying and hiccupping even more:

“Did you think that I wouldn’t understand? Apparently, the freemasons trim their mustaches. It means that you’ve become a freemason. May the milk that I fed you be cursed! Oh, it means that you were a freemason, and we knew nothing about it.”

However much I tried to explain to her that I had done this terrible thing because I was trying to be fashionable, that I didn’t know, it was of no avail. My mother cried even more. She did not believe me. Beating her knees she said:

“I wish I had given birth to stones rather than to you!”

Just at that moment wouldn’t my father walk in? The servant girl had given him the news too. I trembled when I saw through the door, which had remained ajar, that he had come up the stairs with his thick walking stick. I would be a liar if I said that I wasn’t afraid. I understood that I was ruined. My father entered quickly. I was still covering my mustache with my hands. Swinging his stick in the air he shouted:

“Part your hands and let me see!”

Things had gotten complicated. I immediately made up a lie.

“Dad, today when lighting my cigarette I accidentally put part of my mustache on fire... because of that I had it trimmed.”

But my old man did not fall for it:

“You cannot make me swallow such a lie,” he said, “so you mean all the dandies walking around burnt their moustaches?”

I was silent. I didn’t answer.

My father opened his mouth, and closed his eyes. He said such things that I cannot possibly repeat them here. To move the tassel of your fez to the front, to

trim your mustaches were apparently all evidence of the same thing.... And such a dirty thing.

I didn't know what to do in the face of my father's rage. I thought to myself: I wish I had cut my head rather than my mustache. My father said his final words. He disowned me. He threw me out of the house.

"Leave immediately, don't ever think of coming back here Because even if your mustache grows back, your honor will never be restored."

What could I do? Reluctantly I left. I had no place to go. I thought of a friend in Topkapı. I thought I would go and stay with him.

I walked toward the tram. At the corner I saw our athletic friends. When they saw me, they said "bonjour, bonjour, now you look civilized... What was that walrus mustache... like a janissary returning from the grave."

I didn't say hello or answer them. I walked. These gentlemen interpreted what my parents saw as a disaster to be quite fashionable, and nice.

I got on the tram to Topkapı. It was deserted. I slunk to a corner like a guilty person. A *hoca* wearing a white turban with orange embroidery came and sat next to me. I bought my ticket. Periodically, I looked outside. I snuck a glance at the *hoca*. I paid attention. He was staring at me. My heart skipped a beat. "I hope that he too doesn't start to swear at me because of my mustache," I thought. My heart was beating faster and faster. I wanted to get up and get off the tram. I was getting ready.

The *hoca* smiled and said:

"Thank you my dear young man!" Now surprise mixed into my trepidation. "But sir, why?" I asked.

"To see an elegant young man, like you circumcised, is a big honor for us." He said.

I understood. As if out of sensitivity, I didn't want to look anywhere, I slowly lowered my eyes to the ground. No...Yes...No...

I asked again.

“But, how did you know I was circumcised?”

The hoca laughed;

“See, you had your mustache trimmed, my son, isn’t this the honorable tradition²?”

About the Author and the Short Story

Ömer Seyfettin 1884,(Gönen, Balıkesir- 1920, Istanbul]: poet, playwright, essayist and short story writer. He is remembered for his short stories and his voice in the conversation about Turkish as a national language and as an ideologue of Turkish nationalism.

“Kesik Bıyık,” literally means “Cut Mustache” but which I have chosen to translate as “American style mustache” was initially published in the literary and humor journal *Diken* in 1918. The story captures anxieties about Ottoman masculinity in the face of increasing Western military and cultural prowess.

Translator’s Note

Many thanks to Dr. Ceyhun Arslan for helping me find the Ottoman original of the short story and Dr. Sunil Sharma who patiently answered my many questions about the Ottoman text. Every work is always a work in progress and every work can always be improved. I hope that this translation can be of use to students and learners. I am including the Ottoman original.



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² The word “sünnet” is used three times in these few lines in the final instance as “sünnet-i şerif” which could also be a pun as “sünnet” can also mean tradition and I am choosing to translate it as such.