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## **No man's land: gender and sexuality in erotic narratives of the Late Ottoman Empire**

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## Summary

The emergence of Ottoman Turkish popular erotic narratives coincided with the proclamation of the Second Constitution in 1908. Thereafter, the publication of these narratives continued for around two decades until they were prohibited in the early years of the Turkish Republic on the grounds that they would damage public morality. Following this prohibition, the alphabet reform of 1928 made previously published narratives inaccessible to those who were not literate in Ottoman Turkish. In the long term, popular erotic narratives of the late Ottoman period have remained overlooked and often marginalised, even in modern times. This dissertation comprehensively reads examples of Ottoman Turkish popular erotic narratives. It provides insight into newly emerging discourses on gender and sexuality in the twentieth-century Ottoman Empire. In addition to investigating the emergence of new discourses on gender and sexuality through which the transition from sexual practices to construction of sexual identities unfolded, this dissertation is intended to demonstrate the Ottoman Empire's political transition to modernity as well as to the nation state in relation to those newly emerged discourses. Popular erotic narratives within the corpus of this dissertation provide a basis for allegorical readings of the Empire's social, cultural, and political anxieties in the beginning of the twentieth century. This dissertation examines the interactions between social transformation and popular erotic narratives.

It is significant to note that popular erotic narratives do not merely reflect historical and social developments in late Ottoman society. This dissertation treats these narratives as cultural artefacts that represent the ways in which these developments were perceived and resonated in fiction of the

given period. Thus, the historical context in which they were produced becomes significant when analysing these narratives. Reading erotic narratives by contextualising the historical period helps us look at the struggles of the twentieth-century Ottoman Empire from a different standpoint. In this way, the analyses of these erotic narratives play a significant part in revisiting the collective memory of the Ottoman Empire. Chapter One, therefore, is an introductory chapter that tackles historically and culturally specific experiences of modernity in the Ottoman Empire. It focuses on three important realms: education, the press, and urban change in Istanbul during the period in which twentieth-century popular erotic literature emerged. This chapter prepares the ground for the further discussions in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two is devoted to two narratives, *Kesik Bıyık* and *Zifaf Gecesi: Bir Harem Ağasının Muâşakası*, both of which were published during years of war. It exhibits the extent to which the Empire's loss of imperial power and modernisation attempts were allegorically represented as the loss of hegemonic masculinity. In doing so, this chapter reads these narratives allegorically – by applying psychoanalytic literary criticism. Both narratives represent castration anxiety in relation to the Ottoman Empire's socio-political anxieties by using symbolic and literal castration motifs. *Kesik Bıyık* touches upon the way in which hegemonic Ottoman masculinity hung by a thread- via moustache trimming- that suggests the Empire's emulation of the West in the process of modernisation. *Zifaf Gecesi: Bir Haremağasının Muâşakası*, on the other hand, narrates the effort to attain masculinity by an artificial penis imported from Europe. Here, the compensation for the eunuch's liminal masculinity is comparable to the Ottoman Empire's struggle to regain its imperial power by means of modernisation. Therefore, both narratives link the Empire's political situation in the beginning of the

twentieth century to the question of masculinity.

Chapter Three focuses on two development narratives, *Anahtar Deliğinde* and *Kaymak Tabağı*. It also takes its cue from psychoanalytic literary criticism that deals with Oedipal attachments of the narratives. Both narratives revolve around the stories of the sexual development of the protagonists, who secretly look at people engaging in sexual intercourse. Looking at people then turns into looking at the self in the process of personal growth. The narrative *Anahtar Deliğinde* turns into a mirror through which the protagonist's retrospective self-representation of his psychosexual development can be observed, whereas its narration becomes the mirror stage in the sense of Lacan. In addition, *Kaymak Tabağı* tells rivalry stories with regard to the Electra complex. The young female protagonist narrates her sexual development that is ultimately limited to marriage. While discussing psychosexual developments of the adolescent protagonists, this chapter also compares the notion of adolescence to the late Ottoman period. The reason for such a comparison is the transitional feature of the late Ottoman period caused by the Empire's modernisation. On that note, adolescence, a period of dynamic transition from childhood to adulthood, becomes an allegory for the late Ottoman period throughout both narratives. Thus, this chapter discusses the ways in which the notion of adolescence plays along with the late Ottoman period by the development stories.

Chapter Four looks at Mehmed Rauf's adaptation of *Le Roman de Violette* to *Bir Zanbağın Hikayesi*. It first discusses the changes that occurred in sexual practices and construction of sexual identities in the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire. The purpose of this discussion is to demonstrate the extent to which modern discourses on gender and sexuality permeated Ottoman society. In this respect, the juxtaposition of *Bir Zanbağın Hikayesi* and *Le Roman de Violette* shows that Mehmed Rauf's oscillation between

sexual practices and sexual identities in his adaptation stems from the changes in the meaning of sexual practices and is due to the permeation of modern discourses on gender and sexuality. Also, by looking at Mehmed Rauf's adaptation, this chapter scrutinises the ways in which his reading of *Le Roman de Violette* transformed or ignored certain elements such as homosexuality or lesbianism in the narration of *Le Roman de Violette* as a cultural appropriation.

In conclusion, Ottoman Turkish popular erotic narratives are significant historical and cultural artefacts that inform us about the ways in which the Empire's decline and transition to modernity prompted social and political anxieties in late Ottoman society. This dissertation, therefore, is intended to unfold these anxieties by closely reading these narratives. In this respect, the emergence of modern discourses on gender and sexuality in the Ottoman Empire are not only relevant to the discussions concerning identity formations in their own right. By utilising these discourses, erotic narratives provide an unconventional look at the twentieth-century Ottoman Empire. Ultimately, reading these narratives through critical lenses offers a novel contribution to the collective memory of the Ottoman Empire.