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ROUNDTABLE

Crime, Gender, Sexuality: Female Villains in Late Ottoman Crime Fiction

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In 1914, a Turkish novella depicting a young woman pressing a dagger to the throat of a bearded old man on its cover, with the title *Bloody Fairy* (*Kanlı Peri*), appeared for sale on bookshelves in the capital of the Ottoman Empire (Fig. 1).[1] This relatively small book of fifty-four pages, with its price as low as 50 paras, was available to almost anybody who wanted to purchase and read it. *Bloody Fairy* was the first of a popular series of ten murder mysteries, *National Collection of Murders* (Milli Cinayat Koleksiyonu), written by Süleyman Sudi and Vassaf Kadri.[2] On the back cover of the first book, the publishers promised readers that the series would tell matchless mysterious and murderous stories that "will arouse curiosity and excitement" (*merak-aver ve heyecan-amiz*) among readers.[3] This cover image must have been rather curious since popular crime fiction usually featured male protagonists as their central characters. In those books women were almost always the target, not the ones attacking men or committing crimes.[4] A crime story featuring a female character leading a gang, not falling victim to a male criminal or being his lover, was not a figure that readers would expect. The preface of this book—and indeed the whole series—depicts countless oddities, strange events, enigmatic murders, and other crimes that had taken place in Istanbul during

[1] Despite its appeal, historians of literature have largely overlooked the covers and the illustrations used in popular Ottoman literature. In the particular series that I discuss in this article, the first five books of the series have illustrated covers. The illustration used in the first book also is used on the cover of the eighth book, *Kanlı Perinin Son Aşkı* (The Last Lover of the Bloody Fairy). The images seem to be taken from the magazines or books of cheap French press or English dime novels, but unfortunately neither the name of the illustrator nor the source of the image is mentioned. The outer cover and the first page of the book also have been published by different printing houses, hence mention different names, the Şems Matbaası and the Manzume-i Efkar Matbaası respectively. I accessed copies of the books through the Erzurum Atatürk University Library, in the Seyfettin Özege collection. A transliteration of the available copies also had been published recently; see Süleyman Sudi and Vassaf Kadri, *Milli Cinayat Koleksiyonu*, ed. Didem Ardalı Büyükarman (Istanbul: Labirent, 2013).

[2] Süleyman Sudi was the writer and producer of mainly works of popular fiction. He stepped into the publishing business as a bookseller in the early 20th century. After writing several books of cheap fiction, he continued his career on the commercial side of print culture as a publisher. For more detailed information, see Emin Nedret İşli, "Kitabhane-i Sudi Tarihçesi ve Süleyman Sudi Bey," *Müteferrika* 4 (1994): 33–44. Vassaf Kadri also produced popular works of different genres, from fiction to theater plays, but other than his work what we know about him is quite limited. See Metin And, "Moralızade Vassaf Kadri ve Tiyatro," *Türk Dili* 17, no. 193 (1967): 29–33. See also Didem Ardalı Büyükarman, "Moralızade Vassaf Kadri ve Süleyman Sudi'nin Ortak Romanları: Milli Cinayat Koleksiyonu," *A. Ü. Türkiyat Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* 40 (2009): 191–208.

[3] The same back cover was used for the fourth and the fifth books, titled *Unexpected Disaster* (*Ani Felaket*) and An Unseen Love (*Görülmemiş Bir Aşk*).

[4] Vanessa R. Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-De-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Lucy Sussex, *Women Writers and Detectives in Nineteenth-Century Crime Fiction: The Mothers of the Mystery Genre* (Hampshire, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

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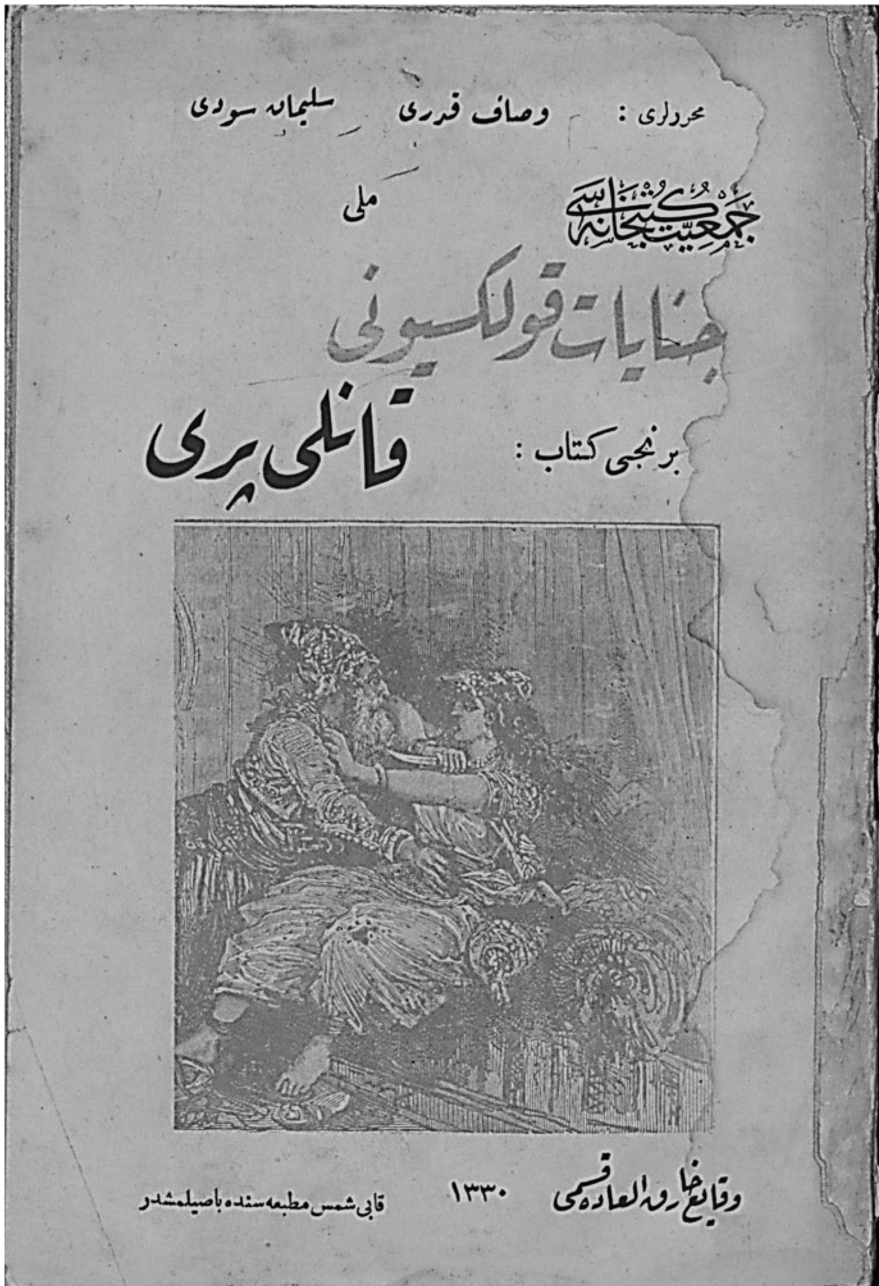

Figure 1. Cover of *Kanlı Peri* (Bloody Fairy).

the prior twenty years. Many of these events were carried out by women. The authors write that although there was nothing astonishing in crimes committed because of a woman, women committing crimes was something never seen or heard of. Thus, they surely hoped that this extraordinary crime series about two female criminals would be a commercial success. On the back cover of the first book, they announced that the series would be published as two parts, comprising ten books each, and would be offered for sale as

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individual titles every Thursday. Unfortunately, their grand plans were never fulfilled; only the first ten books were published.[5] Although the series is far from complete and we will never know about the authors' plans to unfurl further crimes and mysteries, something wondrous eventually happened: these two authors, who were never among the canon of Ottoman Turkish literature, were discovered in the 2000s. In addition to *National Collection of Murders*, several of their other works have been transcribed and published.[6] Süleyman Sudi and Vassaf Kadri, who yearned for popularity in the early 20th century, indeed became popular, albeit a century late.

The rich literature on crime fiction suggests that the emergence and popularity of this genre in the 19th century should be examined in the context of rapid social and urban transformation.[7] The size and population of major global cities were expanding significantly, and the Ottoman capital was no exception.[8] By the beginning of the 20th century Istanbul was the hub of economic transformation, demographic movements, and infrastructural change.[9] The emergence of new urban professions resulted in the expansion of the middle classes. The number of urban workers in service and manufacturing sectors also increased in this period, which deepened the gap between social classes and created hostilities.[10] The differences between the lifestyles of different social groups, Ottoman or foreign, started to become more visible. It was not only work but also entertainment that marked the differences between classes. In addition to traditional places where people came together and mixed, such as the marketplace, graveyards, and houses of worship, new spaces of entertainment like the theaters, beer gardens, and taverns had emerged.[11] The busy tram lines, ferries, and horse carriages across the city, along the Bosporus and the Golden Horn, between the city and the Prince Islands, as well as the intracity traffic of people and goods multiplied the dynamism and complexity, as well as the chaos of the city.[12] People of different backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and classes made each other's acquaintance, becoming friends, and also foes. Although its attraction was blinding the eyes of those who lived in the city, Istanbul also scared its residents. With its ever-expanding alleys, labyrinth-like streets and dead ends, the city was becoming a space of anxiety.

[5] On the back covers of the first, fourth, and fifth books, the authors listed the titles of the eleventh and twelfth books. We do not know if the authors had penned these books and could not publish them or had not yet written them.

[6] For some of their recently transliterated and published works see: Vassaf Kadri, *Kadınlar Komitesi (Hırsız Feneri'nin Zeyli)* (Istanbul: Berfin Yayınları, 2004); Moralızade Vassaf Kadri, *Şimal Rüzgarı* (Ankara: Akçag Yayınları, 2006); Süleyman Sudi, *Gece Kuşları* (Istanbul: Labirent Yayınları, 2013); Moralizade Vassaf Kadri, *Çakıcı'nın İlk Kurşunu* (Istanbul: Yaba Yayınları, 2018); and Moralızade Vassaf Kadri, *Hint Yıldızı* (Ketebe Yayınları, 2021).

[7] See, for example, Carlo Salzani, "City as Crime Scene: Walter Benjamin and the Traces of the Detective," *New German Critique* 34, no. 1 (2007): 165–87. For an excellent discussion of the links between urban transformation, crime, and understandings of criminality in the late Ottoman context, see Nurçin İleri, "İstanbul'un Yeraltı Dünyası: Bıçakçı Petri ve Cinayet Destanları," *Kampfplatz* 7 (2014): 57–82.

[8] The literature on the transformation of Istanbul in the 19th century is too prolific to list here. For a main work discussing the demography of Istanbul, see Kemal Karpat, *Ottoman Population, 1830–1914: Demographic and Social Characteristics* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

[9] For a recent and outstanding examination of the infrastructure and its social and environmental discontents, see Mehmet Kentel, "Assembling 'Cosmopolitan' Pera: An Infrastructural History of Late Ottoman Istanbul" (PhD diss., University of Washington, 2018).

[10] See Donald Quatert, *Social Disintegration and Popular Resistance in the Ottoman Empire, 1881–1908: Reactions to European Economic Penetration* (New York: New York University Press, 1983).

[11] For examinations of the nocturnal life, see Avner Wishnitzer, "Into the Dark: Power, Light, and Nocturnal Life in 18th-Century Istanbul," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 3 (2014): 513–31; and Nurçin İleri, "Allure of the Light, Fear of the Dark: Nighttime Illumination, Spectacle, and Order in Fin-de-Siècle Istanbul," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 37, no. 2 (2017): 280–98. See also Malte Fuhrmann, "Beer, the Drink of a Changing World: Beer Consumption and Production on the Shores of the Aegean in the 19th Century," *Turcica* 45 (2014): 79–123.

[12] See, for example, James Ryan, "Unveiling the Tramway: The Intimate Public Sphere in Late Ottoman and Republican Istanbul," *Journal of Urban History* 44, no. 5, (2016): 811–34.

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Amid this rapid urban change, the social and economic roles of women also were undergoing transformation. Increasing numbers of women started to receive education and take part in paid employment throughout the 19th century.[13] Women made their appearance in the newly established theaters and taverns, and traveled from one end of the city to the other on boats, trams, and carriages. Changing economic and social roles of women added to their increased visibility in urban spaces.[14] It was inevitable that this growing female presence in public places disturbed large groups of people in a society dominated by patriarchal norms. One important channel through which this disturbance and anxiety was expressed was the discourse around crime and criminality. Recent scholarship has produced groundbreaking work in understanding the gendered aspects of crime, which also has demonstrated that the notions of female respectability and propriety were deeply rooted in changing urban experiences.[15]

Along this line, in this essay I explore how popular fiction might add to our understanding of the intricate relations between gender, urbanity, and crime. I focus on the crime series, *National Series of Murders*, which features two female gang leaders as the antagonists. I contend that crime fiction offers us a unique opportunity to examine contemporary anxieties around gender, sexuality, and crime. I will take this chance to think about the ways that anxieties related to late Ottoman sociopolitical transformations were expressed in a gendered language and through the images of female sexuality.

National Collection of Murders is about the struggles between the Ottoman police force, particularly the young and talented officer Hüseyin Bey, also known as the Black Claw (Siyah Pençe), and a criminal gang that has a mother and her daughter as the leaders. The gang resides in a secret underground city located just beneath Istanbul. We learn that some eighty years earlier, during the reign of Sultan Mahmud II (r. 1808–39), a water supply worker who had guided two European tourists through a secret passage under Istanbul later returned by himself and discovered a secret passage to an entire subterranean city. He decides that rather than spending his life as an ordinary urban worker above ground, he prefers to be the head of this hidden city. Shortly after moving there with his wife and two sons, fifteen Janissary soldiers who are fleeing the law seek refuge with him. In return for their submission to his rule, he accepts them to the underground city as the first residents.[16]

By the time the events of the novel take place, the underground city has eighty-seven permanent residents who are members of a criminal gang headed by a mother and daughter, the Dark Witch (Kara Cadı) and the Bloody Fairy (Kanlı Peri). The leaders and gang members live a life of luxury and glamor, supported by theft and robbery in the city above ground.

[13] Duygu Koksal and Anastasia Falierou, *A Social History of Late Ottoman Women: New Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2013).

[14] Ebru Boyar and Kate Fleet, *Ottoman Women in Public Space* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

[15] Fariba Zarinebaf-Shahr, "The Role of Women in the Urban Economy of Istanbul, 1700–1850," *International Labor and Working-Class History* 60 (2001): 141–52. A very important work is Ebru Aykut, "Toxic Murder, Female Poisoners, and the Question of Agency at the Late Ottoman Law Courts, 1840–1908," *Journal of Women's History* 28, no. 3 (2016): 114–37. See also Gülhan Balsoy, "Haseki Women's Hospital and the Female Destitute of Nineteenth-Century Istanbul," *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no. 3 (2018): 289–300; and Gizem Sivri, "Women behind Bars: Penal Policies and Women Offenders in the Late Ottoman Empire (1840–1918)" (PhD diss., Ludwig Maximilians Universität, forthcoming).

[16] By 1911 and 1914, when this series was written and published, it had been almost a century since the Janissary corps was abolished by Mahmut II (1826). In the series, in addition to this imagining of the underground city having been built during his reign, there is a second mention of Mahmud II. It is revealed that one of the "haunted" mansions that was actively used by the members of the gang was built during his reign. These references are important because they demonstrate that in the early 20th century the view that associated the Janissaries with crime and disorder was prevalent, and the memory of their elimination was still fresh. See Mehmet Mert Sunar, "When Grocers, Porters and Other Riff-Raff Become Soldiers: Janissary Artisans and Laborers in the Nineteenth Century Istanbul and Edirne," *Kocaeli Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 17 (2009): 175–94; Shirine Hamadeh, "Mean Streets: Urban Order and Moral Space in Early Modern Istanbul," *Turcica* 44 (2013): 249–77; and Noémi Lévy-Aksu, *Osmanlı İstanbulu'nda Asayiş 1879–1909* (Istanbul: Iletişim Yayınları, 2017).

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Utilizing wells, drain holes, and cistern outlets, they emerge to steal the finest jewelry, carpets, and furniture, in addition to stealing for all of their daily needs, from the residents of Istanbul.

The first book in the series begins with Bloody Fairy breaking into the house of an Armenian jewelry dealer and seizing his goods. She tells him, however, that what she wants is not the jewelry but the services of a male midwife (*lavta*). If he goes and brings one, she will take some of the jewelry that she needs, but hand back the diamonds, the most precious of all the items that she had grabbed. The poor jeweler, scared to death, brings a *lavta* acquaintance. Later we learn that Dark Witch, Bloody Fairy's mother, is about to give birth; it is for her that a doctor is needed. Bloody Fairy takes the doctor to a world beneath the city through a well, and with them we enter a totally different world.

The following books of the series are all about the struggles between the police officer, Hüseyin Bey, and the gang. In these stories, the criminal mother and daughter abduct young men or women to their taste, they rob houses, and they steal jewelry. Almost every time, murders accompany the thefts and kidnappings. Dark Witch and Bloody Fairy regularly inform the police about the crimes they will commit, to ridicule them. In this sense, there is no mystery; on the contrary, the plots of the crimes are rather simplistic. What makes these books interesting is the clash between Hüseyin Bey, the young, handsome, talented, rational police officer, and the ugly, villainous tricksters, Dark Witch and Bloody Fairy. The main tool of the mother and daughter is their ability to manipulate the superstitious beliefs of the city's dwellers. Almost all their tricks are based on exploiting the Istanbulites' fears of ghosts, witches, jinn, and other supernatural forces.[17]

Thus, in *National Collection of Murders* the clash is between two opposing forces. On one side are reason, the police, law, and order, and on the other are superstition, criminals, degeneracy, and vice. This clash between criminals and the police, crime and order, debauchery and family, is in its essence a clash between the female and the male. It is the supernatural, guileful feminine criminal who threatens the rational, honest male.

This strange and gothic world offers us liminal characters that we rarely come across in either literary fiction or archival documents. The book is populated with male and female servants in wealthy mansions, butlers, gardeners, stable workers, journeymen, midwives, wet nurses, concubines, nannies, healers, sorcerers, fortune tellers, soothsayers, peddlers, beggars, coffee house servers—and contract killers. Not only people but also the substances mentioned are subversive: drugs, herbs, toxic potions, rifles, and daggers, as well as tools of torture. The description of the physical space, with shadows, dark and narrow streets, barking dogs, cemeteries, graveyards, and derelict places, intensifies the eeriness and uneasiness. The letters sent by the gang to the officer Hüseyin are written in invisible ink or human blood. With all these elements, the underworld is a realm of transgression and deviance.

The understanding of deviance in this work is framed though sexuality. Dark Witch does not have a husband, yet she gets pregnant and gives birth. Nowhere in the series is she described taking care of her baby. Bloody Fairy is lustful enough to tell her mother about her sexual desires and asks her help in abducting young men to satisfy her urges. Some members of the gang go around naked in the underworld and have sex in other peoples' presence. Deviance and sexuality are embellished with oriental images. The half-naked people of the underground city eat, drink, and dance without clear purpose, and they are surrounded by rugs, carpets, crystal glasses and bottles, mirrors, cabinets, sofas, chandeliers,

[17] In the books, except for one instance, people do believe that Dark Witch and Bloody Fairy are supernatural creatures. In the only case where their tricks do not work, they break into a mansion to abduct the young daughter of the family. All the members of the household believe them when the mother and daughter tell them that they are jinn. Only the two stable workers in the garden, who are described in the story in rather graphic language, with mosquitoes and fleas living on their "mold covered" bodies, were not deceived and caught Dark Witch, handing her over to the police. The police, of course, were then deceived easily by her gullible tricks and watched her escape helplessly. The way these two workers are described, and the mention of their rural origins, is worth noting.

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Figure 2. Cover of *Kara Cadı* (Dark Witch).

and candles. The names of the villainous mother and daughter as well as the black and the red shawls that they are wrapped in reinforce this oriental imagery (Fig. 2).

In this criminal, oriental underworld, gender and class are intertwined. Bloody Fairy is not only bloody from murdering innocent people; her name also subtly refers to menstrual blood, to her lust and appetite for young and handsome boys, and hence to the dangers of active female sexuality. The mother and daughter are dangerous not only because they commit crimes, steal, and murder, but also because they are not from the bourgeois middle class, are not educated, and are not from the upper urban world of the capital. It is both

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their gender and class that make them dangerous. They are villainous because they commit crimes, harm people, and because they pull a whole nation that has prospects for progress to the underground of superstition, crime, and disorder.

Along with gender and criminality is fear of intermingling between the respectable and the unwanted. The fear of the intermingling of the classes stands for the anxieties created by the rapid social fluidity and mobility of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.[18] In the different books of the series, sons and daughters of the most prominent households are abducted. These young men and women, who once led modest respectable lives, become used to the debauched life in the underground and can no longer return to the city above. Sexuality is again the main signifier of their degeneration. Once the respectable is intermingled with the depraved, there is no possibility for cure.

The understandings of class are accompanied by the fear of the transgression of boundaries and the intermingling of opposites, sustaining an atmosphere of constant mistrust and anxiety. In the series, wells, cisterns, and cellars of wrecked houses function as ominous passageways between the underground and the upper urban capital. The porousness of boundaries and risk of transgression reveal themselves in other ways, as well.[19] It is never clear to the police who may be trusted and who may not. Gang members begin to infiltrate the police force. In the last book of the published series, as a result of the tricks of the gang, Hüseyin starts to suspect his closest aide, who, in turn, also suspects Hüseyin. The gang even finds a way to place one of their members into Hüseyin's house as a servant.

As mentioned above, the series was left unfinished. Although we do not know the conclusion envisioned by the authors, in all of the stories that are available the supernatural wins out over the rational, and the criminals are always one step ahead of the law. The gang members are informed of plans of the police, decipher their messages, make people believe their tricks, and ridicule both the police and everyone on the side of order. The police, on the contrary, are deceived by the gang's tricks, lose track of gang members they pursue, cannot keep them behind bars, and as a result are constantly objects of ridicule. Officer Hüseyin cannot even convince his own family members that what they think are supernatural events are only tricks conceived by Dark Witch.

National Collection of Murders is without doubt a fascinating series of books to read and enjoy. But what can we learn as historians from this crime fiction series? What clues can this work provide to early 20th-century social anxieties? What do the villainous mother and daughter stand for? How can we make sense of the intertwining of gender, class, and criminality in the context of early 20th-century Istanbul?

If one purpose of crime fiction is to provide moral tales, the lesson here is to restore gender order as a precondition to restoring public order. Above, I suggested that the transformation of the urban order, which found its utmost expression in the changing roles and visibility of women, created deeply rooted anxieties. Social discontent was expressed through a gendered language, problematizing notions of female respectability and propriety. The criminal and villainous figures in popular fiction offer us the chance to challenge the norms regarding female respectability, domesticity, motherhood, modesty, being devoid of sexuality, and dependence on men. The anxiety regarding the shattering of norms and traditions was encapsulated in the image of the criminal, sexually active women. Those independent women, who lacked male guardians, were seen as threats to social order. And the utmost feeling of fear comes from their criminal and murderous behavior.

[18] For a discussion of eugenicist ideas and the fears of degeneration in the popular genre of advice literature, see Gülhan Balsoy, *The Politics of Reproduction in Ottoman Society*, especially chapter 4, "Pregnancy as a Site of Medical Intervention," 77–98. See also Tuba Demirci, "Body, Disease and Late Ottoman Literature: Debates on the Ottoman Muslim Family in the Tanzimat Period (1839–1908)" (PhD diss., Bilkent University, 2008).

[19] The series itself is located between the boundaries of different genres: crime fiction, suspense, and gothic fiction.

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I want to conclude with a final leitmotif in the stories, which relates to time. The time of the day is mentioned at least once, but more often two or three times in every book. Besides time, there are many references in the stories to different types of clocks.[20] Throughout the narratives, we read about Ottoman pocket watches and wall clocks. Officer Hüseyin has a cuckoo clock with a cabinet at the entrance of his house that even gives its name to the seventh book, *Cling Cuckoo Clock* (*Çın Guguklu Saat*).

I claim that this almost obsessive mention of time and the clocks is an expression of the yearning for order. Knowing the time takes one away from the anxieties of the unknown, resituating one to the safety of the moment. Setting the time is like setting the order. Timepieces also are symbols of progress and modernity. Time is money, and time belongs to the powerful. And it was men who mostly owned the clocks and watches. Perhaps the most dreadful crime that *National Collection of Murders* imagines is the defeat of middle- and upper-class, progressive, rational, orderly masculinity by lower-class femininity.

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[20] For changing notions of time in the late Ottoman context see Avner Wishnitzer, *Reading Clocks, Alla Turca: Time and Society in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also On Barak, *On Time: Technology and Temporality in Modern Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2013).

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