

Fashioning identity: Sartorial symbolism and cultural negotiation in Tanzimat literature of the Ottoman Empire

Modelando a identidade: Simbolismo vestimentar e negociação cultural na literatura do período Tanzimat no Império Otomano

Şakir Özüdoğru¹

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5451-1971>

[abstract] This article explores sartorial symbolism in Tanzimat-era literature (1860-1896) within the Ottoman Empire. The research analyzes sartorial choices as narrative devices in three pivotal Tanzimat novels: *The Carriage Affair* (*Araba Sevdası*) by Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *Mister Felâtun and Master Râkım* (*Felâtun Bey ve Râkım Efendi*) by Ahmet Mithat Efendi, and *Dandy* (*Şık*) by Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar. Drawing on Barthes' semiotic framework, it positions fashion as a performative act that inscribes cultural myths onto the body, articulating narratives of identity, power and transformation. By analyzing sartorial symbolism as a visual grammar, the study employs a comparative character analysis of the *alafranga* and the Ottoman gentleman (*alaturka*) archetypes. The research further offers a novel interpretation of Tanzimat novels by combining sartorial symbolism with Homi Bhabha's postcolonial theories of mimicry and hybridity (third space). It introduces three novel concepts -superficial mimicry, excessive mimicry, and harmonious hybridization- symbolized by the characters in the novels. This interdisciplinary approach aims to bridge literary analysis, historical context, postcolonial theories and fashion studies.

[keywords] **Tanzimat literature. Sartorial symbolism. Ottoman modernization. Semiotics. Mimicry.**

¹ PhD in Communication Design and Management, Anadolu University, Türkiye. Assistant Professor, Department of Textile and Fashion Design, Faculty of Architecture and Design, Eskisehir Technical University, Türkiye. E-mail: sakiro@eskisehir.edu.tr

[**resumo**] Este artigo explora o simbolismo da indumentária na literatura da era Tanzimat do Império Otomano. A pesquisa analisa as escolhas de indumentária como dispositivos narrativos em três romances fundamentais do Tanzimat: *The Carriage Affair* (*Araba Sevdası*), de Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *Mister Felâtun and Master Râkım* (*Felâtun Bey ve Râkım Efendi*), de Ahmet Mithat Efendi, e *Dandy* (*Şık*), de Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar. Com base na estrutura semiótica de Roland Barthes, encaramos a moda como um ato performativo que inscreve mitos culturais no corpo, articulando narrativas de identidade, poder e transformação. Ao analisar o simbolismo da indumentária como uma gramática visual, o estudo emprega uma análise comparativa do caráter dos arquétipos do *alafranga* e do cavalheiro otomano. Além disso, a pesquisa oferece uma nova interpretação dos romances Tanzimat, combinando o simbolismo da indumentária com as teorias pós-coloniais de Homi Bhabha sobre mimetismo e hibridismo. Apresentamos três conceitos, mimetismo superficial, mimetismo excessivo e modernização equilibrada, simbolizados pelos personagens dos romances. Essa abordagem interdisciplinar une análise literária, contexto histórico, teorias pós-coloniais e estudos de moda.

[**palavras-chave**] **Literatura do Tanzimat. Simbolismo vestimentar. Modernização otomana. Semiótica. Mimetismo.**

Received on: 01-07-2024

Approved on: 20-12-2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.26563/dobras.v18i44.1854>

Introduction

In the late Ottoman history, Tanzimat period (1839-1876), officially initiated by the declaration of The Edict of Tanzimat in 1839, was a politically, socially, and culturally vibrant yet controversial era during which Eurocentric ideals began to be implemented by the government. During this era, Ottoman society began to assimilate European influences, leading to the emergence of new social forms and cultural practices. Organizing such practices according to Eurocentric ideals sparked a debate on modernization among intellectuals of the era. On the one hand, a group of intellectuals defended assimilation of European ideals with all its aspects, such as social, cultural, technical, and governmental. On the other, a more skeptical group rejected cultural, social and cultural dimensions of Europeanization and offered selective adoption of technological advances by preserving Ottoman traditions.

Amid these debates, clothing emerged as a central symbol of transformation. European fashions, as one of the most visible symbols of modernization, showcased the Europeanized body in Ottoman society, yet it came with the visible anxiety of losing traditional values. The literature of the era reflects these complex and tense debates with remarkable vibrancy. Tanzimat writers tried to create a synthesis between European influences and Ottoman values through instructive novels. Because of its central role as a visible marker of

both modernization and cultural anxiety, clothing became a significant narrative device for Tanzimat writers in negotiating and forming personal and collective identity.

This study focuses on fashion's role in shaping identity and driving social transformation critically through three novels written during Tanzimat era: *The Carriage Affair* (*Ara-ba Sevdası*) by Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *Mister Felâtun and Master Râkım* (*Felâtun Bey ve Râkım Efendi*) by Ahmet Mithat Efendi, and *Dandy* (*Şık*) by Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar. In these novels, fashion stands as a constitutive element of protagonist's existence, shapes social and cultural practices, and reflects evolving perceptions of the body. These literary works use rich imagery reinforced with sharp contrasts related to clothing. Fashion choices of protagonists represent the ideological choices and cultural tensions faced by their writers and the era. At the heart of these choices and dilemmas lies the struggle of preserving cultural authenticity and ways of adapting to the ideals and practices of Europeanization.

The theoretical framework of this study relies on Homi Bhabha's concepts of mimicry and hybridity. Through the lens of self-orientalism, the *alafranga* and the Ottoman gentleman (*alaturka*) archetypes are interpreted as representations of mimicry and hybridization. The study positions fashion as a performative act that inscribes cultural myths onto the body, articulating narratives of identity, power and transformation. The methodological approach of the study is grounded in Roland Barthes's semiotics, analyzing sartorial symbolism as a narrative device to articulate broader ideological and cultural dilemmas. By drawing perspectives from contemporary cultural theorists, this study aims to bridge literary analysis, historical context, postcolonial theories and fashion studies through an interdisciplinary approach.

Theoretical framework: reformation, hybridization, and *alafranga* vs. *alaturka*

Reformation or The Edict of Tanzimat as a symbol of modernization

Although the Ottoman Empire's first cultural and social encounters with Europe occurred during the Tulip Period (1718-1730), which is considered a time of moderate relations, by the latter half of the 18th century, the Empire began to perceive Europe as a formidable imperial power due to the decline of its own status as a "dominant power" (Çiftçi, 2019, p. 15). To revitalize the state's power, Ottoman statesmen developed strategies influenced by Eurocentric ideals of modernity, incorporating Western military, administrative, and economic structures into the Empire's system (Parla, 2014). By the 19th century, the scope of these ambitions broadened and led to critical transformations in the domains of economy, law, and administration, along with the adoption of European-inspired clothing regulations under imperial directives (Karabulut, 2010).

Symbolizing the Ottoman Empire's formal acknowledgment of Western superiority in technological, political, and organizational spheres, the pivotal moment in this transformative journey was the issuance of the Edict of Reorganization (*Tanzimat Fermanı*) in 1839. Marked by a significant cultural shift, the Edict promised a comprehensive reorganization of

Ottoman rules and institutions (Zürcher, 2004). The declaration of the Edict, also known as the Supreme Edict of Gülhane, is largely accepted as the start of the Tanzimat period (1839-1876) and the beginning of Ottoman modernization following Eurocentric ideals as well (Koyuncu and Tiltay, 2017, p. 2)².

Tanzimat reforms represented a semi-voluntary reorganization program (Parla, 2014) aimed at restoring the Empire's former glory (Kılıçbay, 1989). They were approached with caution and skepticism. On the one hand, Ottoman statesmen sought to reconcile the practical necessities of adopting Western methods; on the other hand, they needed to maintain the Empire's cultural and institutional identity by preserving key Ottoman elements and ensuring that the restructured framework would not completely forsake its unique cultural foundations (Şeker and Özcan, 2021, p. 34). By blending external influences with internal traditions, the Tanzimat reforms aimed to forge a distinctive Ottoman way toward modernity, suggesting a more complex hybrid process.

Hybridization or "mülemma"

Renowned Turkish literature critic Orhan Okay suggests the concept of "*mülemma*", meaning "multicolored", "creolized" or directly "mismatch", to capture the multifaced process of transformation that the Ottoman Empire was undergoing (Okay, 1975). Originally, the term *mülemma* referred to poems composed with each line or section written in a different language. In classical Ottoman poetry (*Divan*), this technique was employed by poets to demonstrate their artistic skill. Drawing an analogy to such poems, Okay illustrates the transformations of the Tanzimat period as follows:

One of the characteristics of the Tanzimat period is the civilization, customs and cultures are mixed together. Rather than a synthesis, it would be more appropriate to describe this as *mülemma*. It is not adopting a cultural element, but only liking it, being unable to abandon the past while failing to achieve a coherent composition. This is the Tanzimat's *mülemma* (Okay, 1975, p. 358, my highlight)³.

As Orhan Okay puts it, Westernization during the Tanzimat period was not merely a copying of the cultural, social and administrative structures of the West but rather a selective process shaped by the Ottoman context. The central pillar of this selective adaptation was Islam, the foundational belief system underpinning the Ottoman values. In other words, the Ottoman endeavor was to achieve modernization while remaining firmly rooted in Islamic principles (Meriç, 1996).

² The Edict is also considered as the symbol of the transformation to a modern state – "intertwined [modernization] would only be possible for 'multi-religious' and 'multi-cultural' Ottoman Empire with a superordinate identity of being 'Ottoman'" (Çiftçi, 2019, p. 21).

³ My translation for: "Tanzimat devrinin hususiyetlerinden biri de Doğu ve Batı medeniyetinin, âdetlerinin, kültürlerinin birbirine karışmasıdır. Buna bir sentezden ziyade eski tabiriyle mülemma demek daha yakışır. Bir kültür unsurunu benimsemek değil, sadece beğenmek, eskiden de vazgeçmemek, fakat bir terkibe ulaşamamak. İşte Tanzimat'ın mülemması budur."

Building on Okay's analogy, the cultural and social transformations of the Tanzimat period can be understood as a complex interplay of adaptation and resistance. Until the Tanzimat period, interactions with and the experience of European customs mostly remained restricted to the palace and its environs. However, European lifestyles -or lifestyles perceived as European- began to spread among upper classes especially residing in the major cities of the period such as Istanbul and Izmir, with the Tanzimat (Mardin, 1969). This shift was most visible in consumption patterns in various spheres (Exertzoglou, 2003), such as food and drink, entertainment and recreation, education, transportation and vehicle use, residence and home life, and clothing and accessories (Mardin, 1990, p. 18; Koyuncu and Tiltay, 2017, p. 8). Blending local traditions with European influences, these changes marked a vital cultural turn.

Fashion was one of the most powerful symbols of this cultural transformation. Reinforced by the state policies, shifting from traditional Ottoman attire to European fashions became a symbol of Europeanization both for the state and individuals (Aysal, 2011). Thus, the adaptations of European fashions can be seen as a metaphor for the broader cultural synthesis, which was a goal of and a challenge for the Tanzimat reforms. The legacy of this hybridization process can be followed today: fusion of traditional and novel practices continues to inspire unique cultural expressions, like contemporary reinterpretations of traditional Ottoman garments, such as caftan, shalwar, or yashmak (Özüdoğru, 2016).

Alafranga vs. alaturka

The appearance of European styles on the streets found its reflection in literary works, as the writers of the period captured the dual nature of the Tanzimat period through the characters they created. The *alafranga* became a literary archetype often portrayed in the period's works. Originating from the Italian phrase "*alla Franca*" (meaning in the French style), the term *alafranga* came to describe Europeanized behaviors, lifestyles, and cultural practices. As the contrast to *alafranga*, *alaturka* was used to describe Ottoman/Turkish lifestyles, signifying adherence to Ottoman-Islamic traditions.

In the literary works, *alafranga* characters are illustrated as superficial imitators of European fashions. Marked by intellectual shallowness, the *alafranga* lacks understanding the essence of Western ideals (Namlı, 2019) and is a "a shallow man who does not any endocarps" and "only consists of borrowed gestures and facial expressions" (Gürbilek, 2012, p. 103).

By employing the stark contrast between *alafranga* and *alaturka* characters, the writers of the Tanzimat novels addressed the most critical issue of their time: the methods and consequences of Westernization. Instead of questioning whether to adopt selective Western practices, the debate of the period was how to integrate them (Arslan, 2018, p. 239). Alienated from deeper intellectual and moral considerations, as well cultural roots as, the *alafranga* archetype was portrayed as emblematic of false Westernization, a "Westernized snob" (Mutman, 2019, p. 230). Loyal to Ottoman-Islamic values, the *alaturka* archetype, or the Ottoman gentleman, was framed as embodying a considered engagement with modernity - an example of right or desired Westernization.

Reading Tanzimat through the lens of self-orientalism

The cultural and ideological implications of the West-East divide are reflected through the contrast between *alafranga* and *alaturka* archetypes, embodying a broader discussion within postcolonial studies. As, in the eyes of statesmen, the adaptation of selective Western practices was essential for the survival of the Empire, the question of how these practices could be integrated into the Ottoman system without undermining the cultural fabric of the Empire became one of the hardest challenges of the time. The *alafranga-alaturka* contrast can be seen as a metaphorical understanding of this challenge, a dilemma that brings a deeper existential question: in a world increasingly dominated by Western power, how the Ottoman Empire should position itself – as part of the Occident or the Orient. The answer of the intellectuals of the period was a clear one: despite ongoing debates among themselves about the methods of implementation, they consistently positioned the Empire as part of the Orient (Arslan, 2018). However, positioning an empire that aimed to modernize rapidly as a part of Orient created many ideological challenges, contradictions, and cultural anxieties.

As the Orient is often constructed as a cultural space through orientalist texts (Güner, 2008, p. 64) framed by stereotypes, orientalism, as Edward Said (1978) puts it in his seminal work, functions as an element of hegemony designed to reinforce Western dominance underpinned by an ontological divide that underscores moral, intellectual and cultural superiority of the West over non-Western civilizations (Hung, 2003). According to this divide, the West is symbolically portrayed as civilized, advanced, and rational, while the East is depicted as sly, mysterious, exotic, and irrational (Echtner and Prasad, 2003). Thus, in a reflexive manner, the binary opposition of Occidental and Oriental maintains the Western imagination of itself by defining the East as its essential “Other” (Sardar, 1999, p. 13).

However, the construction of the image of the Orient by the West is not a one-sided projection; the Orient itself contributes in various ways to the construction and dissemination of this image (Dirlik, 1996). Although Ottoman intellectuals positioned the Empire as a part of the Orient, from the 19th century onwards, they began to view their own society through an orientalist lens. This process, known as self-orientalism, often emerges during the modernization efforts of non-Western societies, where the West is taken as the sole source of progress and renewal (Akkaya, 2020, p. 51). The signs of Western modernization begin to function as performative markers of progress with the internalization of the assumption that the Orient is incapable of producing alternative models of modernization (Yan and Santos, 2009, p. 298). Codified as visible and tangible elements of modernity, these markers become tools for modernizing elites to align with the universal trajectory of “advanced civilizations,” namely the West. Then, these elites attempt to impose these markers upon society through top-down mechanisms and legal frameworks.

One of the most significant outcomes of self-orientalism is the construction of “a new Oriental subject” (Golden, 2009, p. 19). Defined through Eurocentric ideals, this subject positions itself as a civilizing agent within its own society. By internalizing Western standards as markers of progress, it distinguishes itself from the “others” it seeks to reform. In the Ottoman context, this dynamic became particularly pronounced during the Tanzimat period, as modernizing elites of the time, a small group primarily composed of Ottoman statesmen and intellectuals residing in the capital, Istanbul, delineated a divide

within society between the “modern”, namely *alafranga*, and “traditional”, namely *alaturka*. As Edhem Eldem (2015, p. 100) puts it, nowhere is this internalized dissonance more evident than in the coining of a term like *alaturkalık*, an ironic reference that turns the Ottoman identity itself into a shorthand for backwardness and uncivility, a paradox born of the tensions within self-orientalism.

Fashion as sartorial symbolism embodying the divide: almost European, but not quite

As the agent of social change (Lipovetsky, 1994, p. 16) and a site for cultural negotiations (Kaiser, 2012, p. 1), fashion serves as a strong metaphor for highlighting ambivalence and ambiguity (Davis, 1994) in the currents of the Tanzimat period. By referring to Akiko Fukai from Kyoto Costume Institute, as Jennifer Craik (2009, p. 3) puts it, fashion can be understood as a narrative on the visible face of the fictional body. This narrative extends beyond the individual to encompass societal transformations and – fashion, with all its connections to appearance, change, identity formation and lifestyles – becomes a medium for articulating ideological and cultural tensions. Here, I take the definition of fashion beyond mere appearance by referring power relations and subject positions, as Kaiser (2012, p. 1) suggests. In this framework, becoming a tool for both constructing and challenging subject positions, fashion functions as a performative act inscribing power dynamics within a given social structure. By imitating European mannerisms, modernizing elites of the Tanzimat period produced an identity and reinforced it through repeated social practices, or embodied actions, as Judith Butler’s concept of performativity suggests (Butler, 1990). In this respect, fashion, as both a marker of modernity and a medium of cultural negotiation, is imbued with power dynamics that reflect its civilizational associations with Western societies, where it is seen as a symbolic bearer of progress and modern identity (Jansen and Craik, 2016, p. 2).

While spreading among upper classes, these embodied actions – imitation of Western customs ranging from consumption patterns to educational practices and daily encounters – dragged Ottoman intellectuals into a cultural limbo, trapping them between adopting the advancements of the West and preserving the Ottoman-Islamic epistemologies as well as manners. This duality was vividly reflected through the novels of the time, which created a substantial body of literature criticizing the mere imitations of the West as a form of moral, social and cultural degeneration, often presenting detailed sartorial imaginary symbolizing ideological struggles of the era.

By borrowing Homi Bhabha’s concept of “mimicry” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 122), I analyze the anxieties and contradictions inherent in merely imitating Western fashions and customs (*alafranga*) through the novels of Tanzimat period, which used a rich sartorial symbolism as a semiotic device, signifying both the wearer’s alignment with European modernity and fragility of this borrowed identity. Additionally, using Bhabha’s concept of the “third space” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 55), I examine the supposed Ottoman gentleman archetype (*alaturka*), which embodies a relatively coherent identity through a harmonious hybridity that combines European influences with Ottoman-Islamic traditions. Employing Bhabha’s conceptual framework in this study offers a novel perspective to cultural studies, merging postcolonial theories with a fashion studies lens.

However, this framework also presents challenges as the Ottoman Empire has not traditionally been considered a colonized society but rather a colonizing state, particularly from the 19th century, following the legitimization of Westernization movements (Deringil, 2003; Kühn, 2007; Makdisi, 2002)⁴. Yet, from a self-orientalist perspective, as the dressed body becomes a canvas where the ideological struggles of self-orientalism are visibly inscribed, it transforms into a space where the ruler becomes the subject, and the subject becomes the ruler, as Bhabha (2004, p. 122) describes in his notion of mimicry: “almost the same, but not quite.” Wearing a European frock coat distinguishes the modernizing elite from the rest of society, marking him with the signs of modernity while conferring prestige and status; at the same time, as an Oriental subject, he remains a part of the Orient - an Easterner dressed like a European, or in Bhabha’s terms: “almost European, but not quite.”

For instance, Osman Hamdi Bey (1842-1910), an Ottoman statesman, the first Ottoman archaeologist and one of the Empire’s earliest painters, epitomizes this ideological paradox rooted in sartorial symbolism. Educated in France, Osman Hamdi Bey absorbed orientalist aesthetics dominant at the time, framing the East as exotic – a duality emblematic of self-orientalism, as an Ottoman subject painting the Orient through a Western lens. This duality is most prominently displayed in the *Elbise-i Osmaniyye*, an exhibition curated by Osman Hamdi for the Vienna World Exposition in 1873. The exhibition catalogued Ottoman folk costumes in meticulous detail, aligning closely with European musicological practices to assert Ottoman sophistication and cultural diversity (Ersoy, 2003). Simultaneously, by presenting Ottoman attire as artifacts of an exoticized yet civilized empire (Makdisi, 2002), the presentation was framed through a Western ethnographic gaze – reframing tradition not as backward but as a curated cultural legacy. During the exhibition, despite his strong francophone identity, Osman Hamdi Bey included a photograph of himself dressed in oriental garb (Eldem, 2015), blurring the line between object and subject, modernity and tradition through his dressed body.

At this point, Osman Hamdi’s position can be interpreted as an attempt to bridge the cultural divide between the West and the East. The *Elbise-i Osmaniyye* exhibition is not only a self-orientalist gaze directed toward the Ottoman world but also an effort to document the customs, traditions, and clothing of his own multicultural society. As an orientalist and social scientist oscillating between Western modernity and Eastern heritage, he embodies this duality in his personal life, artistic expression, and scientific pursuits. Although traces of self-orientalism can be found in this approach, it can also be considered as an attempt at cultural hybridization, where Western and Ottoman elements coalesce into a distinctive, if ambivalent, narrative.

Another striking example of sartorial symbolism highlighting such hybridization is the *Istanbulin*, an Ottoman adaptation of Western *redingote*. Western-style attire was introduced as a compulsory dress code for civil servants during the Tanzimat period. However, garments like starched shirts and ties caused significant unrest, as they were uncomfortable

⁴ For an alternative interpretation, see Türesay (2013) and Kechriotis (2013): Türesay challenges the characterization of the Ottoman Empire as a colonizer state within the framework of modern colonialism. While acknowledging the Empire’s practices that resemble Orientalist behaviors, he argues these acts were a part of a broader imperial logic rooted in administrative centralization rather than systematic exploitation.

for daily use and posed practical challenges for fulfilling religious obligations such as ablution (*abdest*) and prayer (*namaz*). In response to these tensions, Istanbul tailors invented the *Istanbulin*, a jacket featuring a stand-up straight collar, a single row buttons extending to the waist, and a length reaching the knee (Koçu, 2015). This garment offered a functional compromise between Western aesthetics and Ottoman-Islamic traditions. Over time, the *Istanbulin*, which once symbolized the sartorial identity of the Tanzimat era and was even associated with the sultan, was supplanted by the *redingot*. Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu, a prominent post-Tanzimat writer, captures this transformation in his seminal work *The Rented Mansion* (*Kiralık Konak*), by comparing the *Istanbulin* era with the subsequent the *redingot* era: “There was two eras in Istanbul: one was the *Istanbulin* era; the other was the *redingot* era. [...] The Ottomans were never as elegant, clean, and polite as they were in the *Istanbulin* era. The greatest work of *Tanzimat-ı Hayriye* is the Istanbul gentelman in his *Istanbulin*” (Karaosmanoğlu, 2005, p. 10)⁵.

Functioning as a semiotic system imbued with cultural, ideological, and moral codes, fashion in Tanzimat literature transcends its material dimension, much like in daily life. Through the theoretical framework of mimicry and hybridization proposed by Bhabha, combined with the lens of self-orientalism, clothing becomes an active participant in shaping narratives of modernity and tradition. Thus, sartorial symbolism encodes deeper anxieties and aspirations. In these novels, dressing up is not merely a daily activity but a performative act that signifies the negotiations of power, the transformation of identity, and the search for cultural authenticity.

Methodological approach: bridging literary analysis, cultural narratives and historical context

This study takes clothing as a semiotic battlefield where myths of modernity, authenticity, and progress are contested and redefined. Following Roland Barthes’ description of fashion as a “system of signs,” where clothing operates on both a denotative level and a connotative level (Barthes, 1990), I position fashion as a performative act that inscribes cultural myths onto the body, articulating narratives of identity, power and transformation – serving as an embodied performance that constructs and challenges subject positions. By employing Barthes’ semiotics, my aim is to analyze sartorial symbolism as a narrative device and a visual grammar (Barthes, 1977). To do so, I examine the recurring themes, character arcs, and symbolic elements within and across narratives to reveal cultural and ideological insights (Herman, 2009; Bal, 2017), focusing on the sartorial distinctions between *alafranga* figures and the Ottoman gentlemen in three Tanzimat novels: *The Car Affair* (*Araba Sevdası*), *Mister Felâtun and Master Râkım* (*Felâtun Bey ve Râkım Efendi*), and *Dandy* (*Şık*). At a literal level, for example, a Western suit might signify wealth and modernity, and at a deeper, symbolic level it might convey cultural alienation. The Westernized outfit of Felâtun and Şâtîrzâde is analyzed for its connotations of mimicry

⁵ My translation for: “İstanbul’da iki devir oldu: Biri İstanbulin; diğeri redingot devri... Osmanlılar hiçbir zaman bu İstanbulin devrindeki kadar zarif, temiz ve kibar olmadılar. Tanzimatı Hayriye’nin en büyük eseri, İstanbullinli İstanbul Efendisidir.”

and superficiality, whereas Râkım's hybrid sartorial choices are read as counter-discursive to uncritical Westernization. Positioned as carriers of cultural myths (Barthes, 1972), the sartorial choices of these characters are treated as semiotic signs, illustrating how clothing functions as a narrative device to critique cultural mimicry and celebrate harmonious hybridization as a more sustainable model of modernization.

The study also employs tables visualizing sartorial choices onto character behaviors, narrative arc, and socio-political implications to systematically present the findings. Offering an analysis of how sartorial elements operate as cultural myths and narrative devices, these tables integrate Barthes' semiotic framework with a postcolonial reading.

Employing a semiotic analysis combined with concepts of postcolonial theory, my aim is to bridge literary analysis, cultural narratives, and historical context. This methodology takes an interdisciplinary perspective, underscoring the critical role of sartorial practices in Tanzimat literature and presenting an understanding of how fashion mediates the complex relationships between tradition and modernity, East and West, and mimicry and authenticity/hybridization in the Ottoman context.

Three novels, shared themes

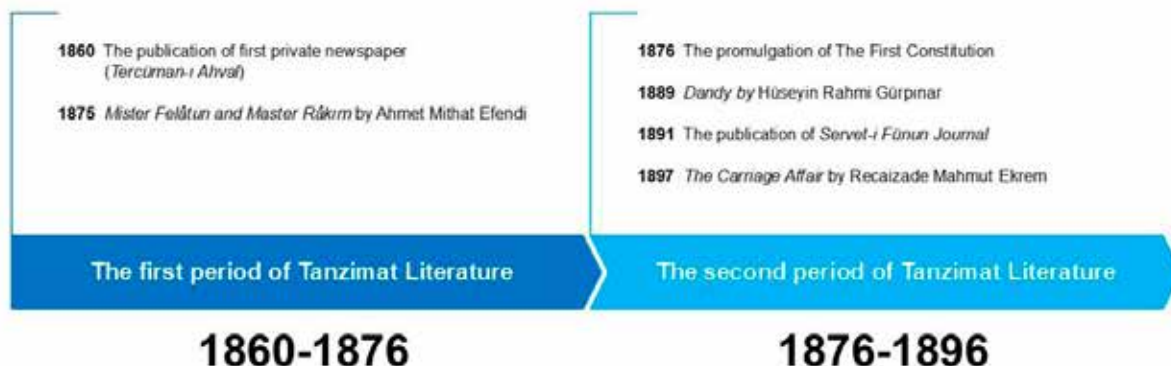
The Tanzimat era marked a profound cultural shift within the Ottoman Empire, where Western literary forms such as articles, plays, novels, and critical essays began to infiltrate into the Ottoman arts, which had long been under the domination of the *Divan* literature – an elite genre confined to the palace and its exclusive audience. These new genres were already starting to treat more public issues, indicating the change toward an all-embracing and popular direction in public discourse. Tanzimat literature became a significant means for intellectuals and writers to engage with this broad change of the epoch.

The novel became of greater significance: it presented the most effective outlet for expressing Tanzimat reforms, the conflict between tradition and modernity, and the balance sheet between Western impact and Ottoman values. As a narrative genre, the novel offered a platform for intellectuals to confront issues of identity, social justice, change, and reform (Parla, 2014). Therefore, Tanzimat novels are not merely historical artifacts; they are profound explorations of cultural and social identity, uniquely situated at the crossroads of transformation.

Tanzimat literature is divided into two periods (Chart 1). The first period began with the publication of the first private newspaper, *Interpreter of Events* (*Tercüman-ı Ahval*), in 1860. New literary genres adopted directly from the West were published in newspapers, often through translations of Western literature. The newspaper itself was regarded as a literary form (Beyaz, 2024, p. 16). This initial period was characterized by a strong emphasis on didacticism and social critique, especially in the novel. The first period concluded with the promulgation of The First Constitution in 1876. Using the novel as a tool to address societal issues, authors in the first period primarily focused on public education. The second period revealed a maturation in narrative techniques and themes, marked by more sophisticated storytelling that employed irony and satire. This phase concluded with the emergence of a new literary approach, *New Literature* (*Edebiyat-ı Cedide*), following the publication of *Wealth of Sciences* (*Servet-i Fünûn*) journal in 1891, which shifted focus toward more individualistic, emotional and artistic pursuits (Andi, 2006, p. 533).

CHART 1 - PERIODS OF TANZIMAT LITERATURE AND PUBLICATION DATES OF ANALYZED NOVELS

Tanzimat Literature Timeline



SOURCE: Produced by the author.

Mister Felâton and Master Râkım was published in 1875, at the end of the first phase of Tanzimat literature, by Ahmet Mithat Efendi and is broadly accepted as one of the first works of fiction in the Ottoman Empire. It is a contrasting story between two Ottoman male: Mister Felâton, who stands as an epitome of idealized *alafranga* with his taste in European aesthetics and lifestyle, and Master Râkım, who is presented in the category of a classically educated Ottoman gentleman in value and depth of education and moral integrity. Mustafa Meraki Efendi, a rich man who lives ostentatiously with a European lifestyle, educates his children, Felâton (son) and Mihriban (daughter), to be concerned with the looks of things more than anything. The consequence is a pair of dandies with a shallow worldview. Felâton hardly ever goes to work and depends on his father's allowance. On the other hand, Râkım, orphaned as a child, is brought up by his nurse, who makes him a responsible and hard-working person. His command of French affords him some translation works, which results in his financial gain. He lives modestly and opts not to marry, focusing on his career. The life of Râkım crosses that of the British Ziklas family, which widens his network further with his ability to speak different languages. Râkım's family increased with the acquisition of a Circassian enslaved woman named Canan; his life was bloomed in happiness and abundance. Meanwhile, profligacy brought about the destruction of Felâton; at last, he was compelled to work in Algeria for the government as his last resort. The contrasting fortunes of Râkım and Felâton point to the recurrent themes that run through the novel – personal responsibility, substance over mere appearance, and consequences of choices made in life.

Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem's *The Carriage Affair* (*Araba Sevdası* in Turkish), written at the end of the second phase of Tanzimat literature in 1896 and published in 1897, takes up the superficial embracing of Western culture on the part of Tanzimat society through its protagonist, Mister Bihruz. Bihruz, living in Istanbul, epitomizes the fashionable Europeanized Ottoman gentleman: he is fully subsidized by his mother and fascinated with the external trappings of wealth. The story unfolds on one beautiful spring day when Bihruz, traveling in his luxurious yellow carriage, finds Miss Perives getting down from an equally chic carriage inside the Garden of Çamlıca. The symbols that draw attention are not Miss Perives

herself but those of luxury surrounding her: carriage, chic environment, amorousness, and French romantic poetry. Bihruz, of course, continues to pursue Periveş with a series of comic but also illuminating misadventures: he writes her a love poem and letter in French, only to realize that he has gotten the main word wrong, and his effort to flatter is one of those language mistakes that flay him. This episode expresses his shallow regard for the culture, which he holds in very high esteem. Infatuated more and more, he is finally broken down by the false news of the death of Periveş herself, becoming insensate from his grief for a woman he barely knew. This makes Bihruz realize that his passions were aimed more at the emblems of affluence and status than Periveş herself. However, the novel points out the vices of an *alafranga* mentality of life in which pretense and appearance are brought on a higher level than authenticity and self-expression. *The Carriage Affair* extrapolates from Bihruz's circumstances to comment on the general social implications of shallow Westernization.

Şık—translated with the shift in the meaning as *Dandy*—by Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar, written in 1888 and published in 1889 during the second phase of Tanzimat literature, tells the story of Mister Şâtırzâde Şöhret, a young man caught by the allure of Western beauty and life. At twenty-five or twenty-six of age, Şâtırzâde, despite his small income, leads a profound life with style, fashion, and European customs. His desire to relive those days, replete with opulence, in the arms of the notorious Beyoğlu courtesan, Madam Potiş, pushes him to steal and sell his mother's diamond earring and use that money to arrange a sumptuous evening in which he can live it up as in the old days. However, Şâtırzâde's attempts at cultivation are accompanied by a series of disasters that ultimately reveal how superficial and fragile his aspirations are. With Madam Potiş and a street dog, which Şâtırzâde initially thinks is an exotic breed from Anatolia, he now can parade himself down Pangaltı Street with confidence. The trio's evening promptly spirals into mayhem when the dog, Drol, sets off the local dogs into a commotion and later spoils a restaurant kitchen by creating a ruckus among other patrons and staff. From here, the situation turns for the worse when Madam Potiş is whisked away forcefully by a character from her disturbed past, and Şâtırzâde, after being beaten and bled white in compensating for the broken-down payment that he promised for the damages caused by the dog, is reduced to a pauper and shambles. His presence in Madam Potiş's house adds to his woes as he finds her missing and gets subjected to more disgrace by the landlady. Destitute and desperate, Şâtırzâde takes shelter for the night in a store in Taksim, where a chance meeting with an acquaintance resulting in an invitation to another calamitous social occasion. His final and disastrous attempt at social redemption in the Tepebaşı Gardens—to pose as Madam Potiş and her dancing tutor—ends when the dog, Drol, dies, and police involvement follows. Misinterpreting nature, Şâtırzâde confesses that he is a thief and ends up in prison ultimately.

It is these stories that serve as poignant criticisms of the Tanzimat period's fascination with the West. These are very different novels with dissimilar stories, yet all at one center: The characters in the novels all walk around a city with which they are familiar, but also in the process of transformation. This is reflected in the interactions and the movement of the characters over several different parts of Istanbul, which serves to reflect their personal and society standings. Regarding the choices this cast of characters makes in fashion and sartorial habits, it is perhaps a visualization of their inner turmoils and conflicting aspirations: European styles adopted by some and the traditional attire maintained by others

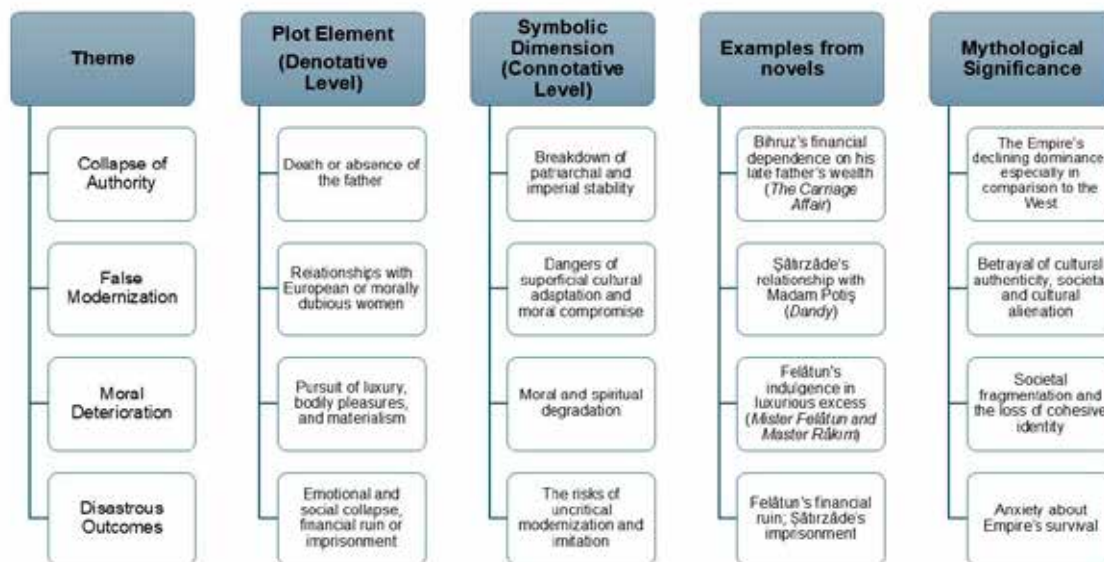
(Özer, 2009). Here, fashion does not only denote personal adornment but also identity and social status. It then becomes a lens through which the characters see and are seen by others, establishing their own and others' social standing about a world in flux. Elaborate descriptions of dress and public appearance in these stories reveal new social codes and status anxieties that went hand in glove with a society coming to terms with modernity.

Moreover, these novels are also an initial response to false Westernization (Tüzel, 2022). People, characters that are written as *alafranga* in these stories, become people who have lost their fundamental values and are unable to understand European philosophical, social, and cultural values. All these Western characteristics are superficially imbibed by them, most preferably in clothing, which eventually end them to their doom or unhappy ending, that is, an ending of the loss of fortune, humiliation, loss of pride, or jail.

As Jale Parla (2014, p. 20) notes, the epistemology of Tanzimat literature is shaped by an Ottoman-Islamic worldview, which contrasts with European empiricism and positivism. This framework imbues the narratives with a sense of “stable and unchangeable reality,” not as direct reflections of historical events, but as constructs rooted in the authors' interpretations of society. The storylines, though romanticized, weave together observed elements of Ottoman life, resonating with the educational and moralistic goals of the period. In works of Tanzimat literature, characters are crafted not merely based on behaviorist principles but are rather molded in accordance with ideal cultural archetypes and parabolic models (Parla, 2014, p. 21). Their life stories are constructed in a way that critiques deeper cultural and societal issues: the death of a father, a recurring theme where protagonists are often financially dependent on their mothers or a heritage, signifies a collapse of traditional authority within the Empire. Relationships with European women or morally dubious figures, such as Madam Potiş in *Dandy* or the imagined “Europeanized” Perives in *The Carriage Affair*, represent flawed attempts at modernization. The pursuit of luxury, bodily pleasures, and materialism which is forbidden by Islam, underlines moral deterioration. Finally, the narratives often culminate in financial disaster or imprisonment, serving as a stark warning of the disastrous outcomes of superficially adopting Western ways, which metaphorically could allude to the potential downfall of the Empire itself.

Drawing from Barthes semiotic framework, this narrative structure, grounded in narrative archetypes, can be effectively analyzed to reveal how seemingly simple plot elements function as carriers of broader ideological tensions. At the denotative level, the plotlines present linear stories; however, at the connotative level, these events symbolize broader struggles and outcomes, such as the weakening of authority, flawed and risky attempts at modernization, preoccupation with materialism and sensual indulgence, and moral erosion. The authors of the period transform their writings into cultural myths by using metaphorical and symbolic devices. By linking individual characters and events to collective fears about authority, modernization, and moral erosion, Chart 2 illustrates how specific narrative elements in Tanzimat literature transcend their immediate plotlines to reflect anxieties of the time.

CHART 2 - SEMIOTIC AND SYMBOLIC ANALYSIS DIMENSIONS IN OF TANZIMAT LITERATURE



SOURCE: Produced by the author.

This semiotic framework demonstrates how personal struggles, such as moral decline or the superficial mimicking of European appearances, are metaphorically linked to the Empire's collective challenges. Thus, these stories reflect individual failures but also serve as cultural myths, projecting the broader social dilemmas of identity formation during the era. In this context, fashion emerges as a compelling metaphor – a sartorial battlefield where external appearances and internal values collide, and the anxieties of cultural negotiation become visibly encoded. On the one hand, Ottoman society embraced European fashions with enthusiasm; on the other hand, fashion represented the antithesis of what Islamic values, often associated with sensuality, luxury, and materialism. Tanzimat authors, therefore, positioned fashion as a paradoxical agent: as a visible marker of modernization that at the same time threatens the moral and cultural fabric of the Empire.

Positioned as a driving force behind the erosion of traditional values, fashion embodies an uneasy hybrid: it presents Ottoman subjects as both aspiring modern Europeans and alienated Easterners. This ambivalence frames fashion as a semiotic site where the contradictions of modernity (*alafranga*) and tradition (*alaturka*) converge. Since many Tanzimat writers illustrated fashion as an antagonist to the survival of the Empire, they also revealed its role as a symbol of cultural transition in shaping the individual and societal identities.

Sartorial Symbolism in Tanzimat Literature

In a broad sense, sartorial symbolism can be considered as the transformation of clothes into narratives loaded with cultural, ideological and personal meanings. In his study, I read sartorial symbolism as a semiotic system in Tanzimat literature, especially in the context of the novels analyzed, taking it as a signifier of identity, power and transformation. In this context, clothing in Tanzimat literature takes place as a visible expression of internal conflicts, social anxieties, and cultural dilemmas as well. Therefore, sartorial symbolism should be evaluated as a space of cultural negotiation. The concept of hybridization finds resonance in the sartorial elements depicted in these novels. Clothing becomes a site where the complexities of Ottoman modernization are negotiated—serving as both a tool of mimicry and a vehicle for expressing resistance to cultural hegemony. The recurring trope of the *alafranga* exemplifies the dangers of superficial Westernization, critiqued as both a personal failing and a broader societal challenge. From Bihruz's flashy European outfits to Râkım's Ottoman attire, clothing presents a social negotiation of identity. Following the semiotic framework, these sartorial elements, at the denotative level, reflect character's societal roles and personal aspirations; and at the connotative level, they symbolize larger themes, such as mimicry, hybridity, and resistance.

Beyond the symbolism of sartorial choices of individual characters, the contrast between the *alafranga* and the Ottoman gentleman emerges as a recurring theme. These archetypes serve as narrative devices, employed by the authors to represent ideological tensions of an era where modernization and tradition intersected and clashed. Additionally, authors used these contrasts to enhance the instructive side of their narratives.

Revealing these archetypes' function as cultural myths and symbolic narrative devices, Chart 3 provides an analysis of sartorial symbolism by contrasting the *alafranga* and the Ottoman gentleman (*alaturka*) to illustrate how contemporary themes such as mimicry and hybridity can be interpreted through Tanzimat novels from a fashion studies perspective.

CHART 3 - FASHION AS A CULTURAL DIVIDE: THE *ALAFRANGA* VS. THE OTTOMAN GENTLEMAN IN THE ANALYZED NOVELS

	Alafranga		Ottoman Gentleman	
Attire Description	Bihruz	Tailor-made topcoat, silver headed-walking stick, enamel watch attached to gold silk ribbon, satin vest	Râkım	Traditional Ottoman attire (probably shalwar, mintan, caftan, fez, vest)
	Felâtun	A fast changing wardrobe according to fashion plates circulating in Istanbul		
	Şâtırzâde	Cheap suits, bonjur, a violet on his collar, gloves, walking stick, monocle, corset, powder		
Sartorial Symbolism	Bihruz and Felâtun	Superficial mimicry	Râkım	Balanced modernization
	Şâtırzâde	Excessive mimicry		
Function as a Cultural Myth	Bihruz	Fragility of identity	Râkım	Harmonious hybridity
	Felâtun	Moral and financial collapse		
	Şâtırzâde	Self-destruction		
Behavioral Expression	Exaggerated, and attention-seeking		Composed demeanor, embodying self-assurance	
Moral Foundation	Morally eroded, driven by materialism and vanity		Ethically grounded, emphasizing integrity and self-awareness	
Social Interaction	Disconnected, driven by self-aggrandizement		Engaged, built on reciprocity	
Cultural Identity Formation	Rootless imitator, disconnected from both Ottoman tradition and Eurocentric ideals		Deeply rooted in Ottoman heritage while harmoniously engaging with modernity, grounded identity	
Symbolic Narrative Function	Embodiment of superficial and excessive mimicry		Representation of harmonious hybridity	

SOURCE: Produced by the author.

The alafraŋga as superficial and excessive forms of mimicry

The *alafraŋga* figure, as portrayed Bihruz, Felâtun, and Şâtîrzâde in the novels analyzed, is an incomplete figure who exists solely for appearance -a superficial screen lacking any depth beyond outward expression, reflected in everything from sartorial choices to social interactions and moral foundations. In *The Car Affair*, Bihruz shows an obsession with Western attire: his tailored suits purchased from well-known tailors in Istanbul, and his iconic yellow carriage -giving the novel its name- symbolizes his desire to be seen and be admired. For the *alafraŋga*, everything revolves around appearance. At the beginning of the novel, the author describes Bihruz as follows: “Wherever Bihruz went, wherever he was, his only goal was to be seen and only to be seen.” (p. 16)⁶. Through the critical tone of the novel, his obsession with carriage and fascination with Western lifestyles becomes an allegory of superficial Westernization. He emerges as a superficial figure, totally alienated from his culture and shaping his identity through foreign appearances and aspirations without being able to grasp their essence.

Similarly, in *Mister Felâtun and Master Râkım*, the author criticizes the superficial Westernization through the sartorial choices of Felâtun. Although the author does not directly list Felâtun’s clothing items, he emphasizes his extravagance and passion for European fashions as follows:

If you ask about Mister Felâtun’s clothing, I cannot fully describe it to you. Let me just say this: you know those cardboard illustrations displayed in dress shops and tailor stores in Beyoğlu to showcase the latest fashions? Well, Mister Felâtun owns several hundred of them. He would take one of these illustrations in hand, stand in front of a full-length mirror, and work until he perfectly resembled the picture. As a result, no one could see him in the same outfit for two consecutive days, making it impossible to say, “This is Mister Felâtun’s style” (p. 13)⁷.

Likewise, his obsession with to be seen, the *alafraŋga*’s behavioral expressions, such as exaggerated gestures and performative behaviors, turn into a spectacle devoid of substance. Borrowing from Goffman’s concept of impression management (1956), this style of presentation becomes a hollow performance which can be identified as an ill-fitting, borrowed staging rather than a coherent expression of self. These performances can be seen as scripts that fail to align with the actor’s inner convictions, and result in a fragmented and unconvincing portrayal of self. The *alafraŋga* embodies a sort of borrowed gesture, a performative expression that is adopted from an external source without internalization or adoption to one’s authentic context.

⁶ My translation for: “Bihruz Bey her nereye gitse, her nerede bulunsa, amacı görünmekle birlikte görmek değil; yalnızca görünmekti.”

⁷ My translation for: “Felâtun Bey’in kıyafetini sorarsanız, size anlatmaya gücüm yetmez. Şu kadar diyelim ki, hani Beyoğlu’nda elbiseci ve terzi dükkânlarında modaları göstermek için mukavvalar üzerinde birçok resimler vardır ya! İşte bunlardan birkaç yüz tanesi Felâtun Bey’de de vardır. Elinde resim, boy aynasının karşısına geçer ve kendisini resme tam benzetinceye kadar çalışırdı. Onun için kendisini iki gün aynı kıyafetle gören olmazdı ki ‘Felâtun Bey’in kıyafeti şudur’ demek mümkün olsun.”

This lack of depthless echoes through the social interactions of the *alafranga*. In these novels, the *alafranga*'s engagement with Europeans is often characterized by envy and a profound sense of inadequacy. His envy and inferiority complex make the *alafranga* an easy target for mockery and humiliation. Driven by a desperate need for external validation, he fails to recognize the sincerity in those he seeks to impress. This dynamic is illustrated in *Dandy*, where Şâtîrzâde becomes entangled in the schemes of Europeans like Madam Potiş and her ex-lover, Hristo. Exploiting Şâtîrzâde's naive aspirations, Madam Potiş introduces Hristo as a renowned Parisian dance instructor and persuades Şâtîrzâde to learn so-called "grasshopper dance", purportedly the last craze in Paris. Eager to present himself as a sophisticated gentleman, Şâtîrzâde unquestioningly performs the absurd dance movement by following Hristo's instruction. His repeated falls during the dance literally and figuratively symbolizes his incapability to endure the façade he has constructed. Similarly, in *Mister Felâtun and Master Râkım*, the French theater actress Polini manipulates Felâtun by enticing him into gambling away his fortune. Marked by cultural dissonance, these portrayals of European women as conniving figures emphasize the vulnerability of the *alafranga* in navigating social interactions. The *alafranga*, in these novels, is portrayed in disconnected, self-aggrandizing social interactions which function as a compensatory mechanism, rooted in a desperate need for external validation, borrowed gestures aimed at impressing others. Reinforcing a cycle of isolation and delusion, these interactions act as mirrors for the individual's imagined self. As the projected image fails to align with a grounded sense of self, the desire for recognition leaves individuals vulnerable to ridicule and exploitation.

Moral foundation is another key aspect to understanding the myth constructed through these novels about the loss of cohesive identity. This aspect is directly related to sartorial symbolism, through ostentation, consumerism, and materialism. In *Dandy*, Gürpınar (2012, p. 27) states, "Excessive elegance in dress sometimes means the outward signs of the evils that are involved in the creation of human beings,"⁸ suggesting that an overemphasis on sartorial display may reflect deeper moral shortcomings. The *alafranga* exemplifies "conspicuous consumption" which Veblen described as "the consumption valuable goods is a means of reputability to the gentleman of leisure" (Veblen, 2007, p. 53). The *alafranga* is a prodigal figure, spending his inheritance for the sake of showing off. In *The Car Affair*, the author describes the depletion of Bihruz Bey's inheritance, and he adds: "Yet, despite all this, Bihruz continued to plunge headlong into his world of entertainment, rushing about with his carriage, his servants, and all his pomp and show" (Ekrem, 2010, p17)⁹. Thus, the acts of *alafranga* emerge as a flawless example of conspicuous consumption: his relationship with his work is not rooted in productivity or responsibility; instead, he spends most of his time to performative displays of status. His primary objective is simply "to be seen". From flamboyant clothing styles to performative social interactions, his obsession with appearances permeates every aspect of his life.

⁸ My translation for: "Kıyafette görülen aşırı şıklık bazen insanın yaradılışına karışan kötülüklerin dış belirtileri demektir."

⁹ My translation for: "Hal böyleyken Bihruz Bey dalmış olduğu eğlence alemine arabasıyla, hizmetçileriyle, tantanasıyla koşturmaya devam ediyordu".

The *alafranga*'s fixation on sartorial display and performative social interactions reflects mimicry what Hobi Bhabha describes as colonial mimicry, or an ambivalent imitation (Bhabha, 2004, p. 122) – almost same as the European, but not quite. Based on the analysis, this kind of mimicry can be identified as superficial mimicry, which refers to the adoption of appearances, manners, and external markers of a foreign culture during a cultural shift, without any epistemological, philosophical, or cultural depth. Exemplified by Bihruz, superficial mimicry may lead to social and emotional collapse, ultimately shattering one's identity. On the final page of *The Car Affair*, Bihruz discovers that Periveş, the woman he idealized and admired, is not a wealthy socialite but merely a maid. This revelation exposes the fact that Bihruz's all world is just a façade, everything he has built his identity upon is disconnected from reality, a “virtual” presence (Bhabha, 2004, p. 123). The author describes this moment as an existential crisis in which Bihruz loses his grip on reality:

Lost within this peculiar feeling, he could no longer find any sweet or bitter pleasure in his life. He was unable to recognize his own existence. Unable to think of where he was, what he was doing, or what he was about to do, he moved his body aimlessly. (Ekrem, 2013, p. 216)¹⁰

In *Dandy*, superficial mimicry reaches an extreme. The protagonist, Şâtîrzâde, is depicted through his extravagant, gaudy and mismatched sartorial choices. His attire includes cheap suits crafted by untalented tailors, gloves, cane and monocle, as well as more unusual elements such as corset and powder. Particularly, the use of powder is symbolically expressed in the narrative. During the Tanzimat period, the use of powder by men was often condemned as a sign of moral erosion. The author highlights this detail in the novel as: “If a man surpasses women in the use of female ornaments such as powder, blush, redness, etc., his morals may be questioned” (Gürpınar, 2012, p. 27)¹¹. Correspondingly, Şâtîrzâde is portrayed as a particularly bad-tempered and ugly character. Despite his dark complexion, coarse features, broad forehead, crow-like nose, lanky frame, and gaunt appearance, he seems himself as remarkably handsome, even going so far to consider himself as an “object of fine arts” (Gürpınar, 2012, p. 27). Beyond his delusions of elegance, he is also a conniving, thieving, and foolish individual. Combining Şâtîrzâde's physical attributes and ill-tempered personality with his sartorial choices creates a bizarre, absurd, and grotesquely comedic figure which is delusional and completely alienated from himself and his environment.

This grotesque portrayal shows his superficiality and exaggerates the flaws in his mimicry of Western aesthetics. More than that, it advances superficial mimicry to the level that can be identified as excessive mimicry. Based on the analysis, excessive mimicry can be defined as an exaggerated form of cultural imitation in which the external aspects of another culture—such as fashion, behavior, or aesthetics—are adopted to an extreme degree, often

¹⁰ My translation for: “Bu garip duygu içinde hayatından acı tatlı hiçbir zevk alamaz oldu. Varlığını bilemiyordu. Nerede bulunduğunu, ne yaptığını, ne yapacağını düşünemeyerek vücudunu hareket ettiriyordu.”

¹¹ My translation for: “Bir erkek, pudra, allık, kırmızılık gibi kadınlara özgü olan süs eşyalarını kullanmakta kadınları geçerse onun ahlakından kuşkulandırılabilir”.

to the point of absurdity or grotesqueness. It turns mimetic action into a delusion, a schizoid state that disconnects the individual from both their authentic self and cultural reality, leaving them trapped in a performative yet incoherent identity. This kind of mimicry leads to humiliation and self-destruction, exemplified by Şâtîrzâde's imprisonment. Ultimately, Şâtîrzâde, neither fully Western nor authentically Ottoman, becomes a grotesque caricature of Westernization.

The archetype of the *alafranga*, as a rootless imitator, disconnected from both Ottoman tradition and Eurocentric ideals, embodies a fragmented identity trapped in a cultural limbo. Relying on superficial sources such as gossip, indulgence, and fashion magazines, he consumes European culture with great appetite. Fascinated by the novelty, the *alafranga* seizes everything he perceives as new to consume it and then pursues the next superficial fascination. This results in a lack of internal coherence. His consumption leaves behind residue, an excess that fails to integrate into a coherent sense of self. He attempts to learn French, which is emblematic of the culture he admires, but he fails. He often establishes relationships with foreign women who exploit him and is eventually humiliated, betrayed, or even imprisoned. He never achieves a sense of belonging; however, he transforms into a caricature of the culture he admires. While he disdains his own culture, he cannot escape. In *Mister Felâtun and Master Râkım*, for instance, a scene depicts Felâtun's trendy skinny pants tearing during a European dance. His traditional underwear is exposed, leaving him deeply embarrassed.

Trapped in this relentless cycle, the *alafranga* is condemned to alienation. Belonging nowhere, he is left in an identity void. This loneliness, even though he may not recognize it, fragments his sense of self by leaving him in a state of disorientation and loss - a state that leaves him at the heart of the clash between a disparaged and abandoned tradition and ever-elusive progress that remains perpetually ahead of him. Like Walter Benjamin's notion of the time of the now (Benjamin, 2003), as a self among the fragments of a tradition trying to be left behind and the unyielding pull of a future, he exists in a liminal space where identity is deferred.

The Ottoman gentleman as harmonious hybridization, or third space

Ahmet Mithat Efendi constructs an opposing figure to the *alafranga*, Felâtun, in his novel, *Mister Felâtun and Master Râkım*, by introducing the Ottoman gentleman, Râkım, who keeps faith with his traditional values while embracing the advances brought by modernization. The author does not provide an in-depth description of Râkım's clothing items; however, he is portrayed as a typical Ottoman gentleman and celebrated for his frugality, sense of responsibility, and intellectualness. Interestingly, in the numerous editions of the book published over years, Felâtun and Râkım are characterized by sartorial symbols on their covers. For instance, Felâtun is often illustrated wearing a hat, while Râkım is shown with a fez. Beyond his wardrobe, Râkım is fluent in foreign languages and possesses an intellectual understanding of Western culture. Thus, through his trusting relationship with the British Ziklas family, he sets the stage harmonious hybridity, a space for cultural negotiation, where identities are coexisted in a dynamic interplay.

The behavioral expression of the Ottoman gentleman stands in stark contrast to the exaggerated gestures of the *alafranga*. Defined by authenticity, his actions reflect internal stability and a deep connection to cultural heritage. This coherence between values and behaviors offers a sense of integrity that goes beyond superficiality. Reflecting quite self-possession, Râkım's actions are deliberate yet natural. Whether engaging with his Circassian enslaved woman, Canan, or European friends, Râkım demonstrates a respect for both tradition and modernity. He earns administration through genuine reciprocity rather than ostentation. The Ottoman gentleman's gestures show a measured, situational performance that reflects internal coherence, a sign of being true to one's self and cultural identity. His behavioral expressions represent an embodied authenticity -lived through behaviors, relationships, and decisions- that achieves an unwavering alignment between inner convictions and external conduct.

Likewise, the Ottoman gentleman's social interactions exemplify an ethos of mutual respect and understanding. He is portrayed as an individual deeply connected to his surroundings. His social interactions are based on moral duty, humility, and generosity. Forging meaningful bonds through actions that reflect his inner virtues, the archetype of the Ottoman gentleman stands as an anchor of social harmony. His family relationships are marked by selflessness and prioritization of others over himself. Despite growing up as a poor orphan, Râkım uses the first earnings from his translation work to buy beautiful clothes for his nurse. He also brings home the enslaved woman Canan to assist her with household tasks. His actions signify a profound moral compass rooted in gratitude for those who nurtured him. Reflecting a selfless worldview that prioritizes collective well-being, Râkım's gestures transform familial and social obligations into opportunities to give. The Ottoman gentleman is portrayed in engaged social interactions built on reciprocity, rooted in mutual respect and understanding, and characterized by an openness that invites trust. Rather than mirroring an imagined, delusional self for external validation, these interactions encourage the embodiment of one's values through the cultivation of meaningful and transformative relationships.

The hybridity exemplified by Râkım resonates with the concept of "third space", described by Bhabha (2004, p. 55) as "an in-between space of cultural encounter" in which "the binary of the self and the other, the colonizer and the colonized, or the East and the West" is deconstructed (Bhandari, 2022, p. 171). The construction of a hybrid identity occurs through cultural negotiation, where past (tradition) and present (modern) interact to produce a dynamic cultural identity. Third space is a space where cultural meaning emerges in the liminal zone between traditions. Râkım is portrayed as a traditional Ottoman gentleman with numerous foreign friends living in Istanbul who respect and trust him. One of the important building blocks that constructs the "third space" is trust. Unlike his *alafranga* counterparts, Râkım strives to gain the trust of Europeans rather than seeking their approval. Thus, trust becomes a vital element of mutual understanding. In one scene of the novel, Râkım has a sensual experience with the French piano teacher Yozefino. Yozefino then explains her trust in Râkım as follows: "My confiding in you and showing you affection in this way is due to the fact that you are a truly lovable man and that you are known by all as a moral, honorable and honest person. You also understand the importance of protecting my reputation among families, and I trust you will keep this matter discreet for as long as

necessary” (Ahmet Mithat Efendi, 2010, p. 57)¹². In their relationship, trust serves a critical foundation that transcends mimicry. And also, Râkım’s trust-building opposes the colonial narrative that often illustrates the Orient as morally and culturally inferior (Said, 1978). Validating Râkım’s identity without reducing it to an exotic caricature, Yozefino’s recognition of Râkım’s virtue subverts this stereotype, establishing trust as a cornerstone for meaningful cross-cultural engagement. Unlike Felâtun, who is a merely superficial imitator of Western lifestyle, Râkım, with his intellectual adaptability, understands Eurocentric ideals and integrates them deeply into his life. Thus, he represents a culturally grounded identity, open to negotiation as an equal rather than uncritically admiring one culture, blending elements of both the East and the West.

The Ottoman gentleman is not portrayed as resistant to change. On the contrary, he emerges as an intellectual figure, eager to understand and engage with different cultures, however, when interacting with these cultures, he does so on the foundation of his own values. His identity is rooted in traditions and customs, yet he possesses the intellectual depth to recognize that these can evolve over time – a transformation he views as both inevitable and poignant. In contrast to the *alafranga*, he faces the pressure of the present, namely modernization, by building his vision of the future upon the fabric of tradition. Râkım’s synthesis reflects Walter Benjamin’s concept of the constellation, which involves assembling fragmented cultural elements into a cohesive and meaningful whole (Benjamin, 2007). This act of reassembly does not deny the fractures of history; instead, it acknowledges and incorporates them as essential components of a dynamic and evolving identity, as Bhabha (2004, p. 55) states for the third space “which ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, historicized and read anew”. The Ottoman gentleman embodies integration which is a dynamic process of synthesizing cultural elements from diverse sources into a coherent identity that evolves in the continuity of tradition by embracing renewal.

Conclusion

By taking fashion as a site for cultural negotiation, this study has positioned Tanzimat literature as a space where modernity and tradition are both staged and critiqued. Transforming into a performative act that encodes identity, power, and transformation, clothing in the Tanzimat period transcends its materiality and becomes a metaphor for the new Ottoman body. This body lies at the center of the debates of the time – how to modernize without losing traditional values -a question that continues to resonate in today’s globalized world. As cultural myths, the *alafranga* and the Ottoman gentleman archetypes symbolize the anxieties surrounding this clash. These figures personify the ambivalence of cultural mimicry. The *alafranga* archetype exemplifies superficial and excessive mimicry, criticized by Tanzimat authors for moral erosion, identity fragmentation, and leading to emotional,

¹² My translation for: “Sana bu şekilde sırdaş olup sevgi göstermem, hem hakikaten sevilecek bir adam olduğundan, hem de her tarafça ahlaklı, namuslu ve dürüst biri olarak bilinmenden kaynaklanmıştır. Benim de aileler arasında bu yoldaki tanınmışlığımın korunması gerektiğini de bilirsin, artık bu sırrı ne kadar saklamak gerektiğini anlamalı.”

financial, and social collapse. In contrast, the Ottoman gentleman offers a model of balanced modernization, or harmonious hybridization, deeply rooted in heritage while engaging with the advances of the modern era. This archetype emphasizes integrity and self-awareness, evolving within the continuity of tradition by incorporating renewal without losing its cultural foundation.

The concepts developed during the analysis -superficial mimicry, excessive mimicry, and harmonious hybridization, offer a lens for postcolonial studies. Although specific to the Ottoman Empire's unique position as both colonizing power and a self-orientalized subject, the scope of the concepts can be expanded to contemporary cultural negotiations through comparative analysis. In this context, fashion, through general appearance and behavioral expressions, functions as a sartorial battlefield, where the semiotics of the past (tradition) and the new (modernity) collide. As revealed by the *alafranga* type's mimetic actions, sartorial symbolism extends beyond personal choices to mirror the collective anxieties about survival, cultural hegemony, and authenticity. Here, fashion serves as a contested space that encodes aspirations for progress and also fears of cultural decline. The dressed body, as portrayed in the analyzed works, becomes both a stage for identity performance and a canvas where the anxieties and aspirations of a society in flux are visibly inscribed. By integrating semiotics and postcolonial studies, this analysis highlights the potential of sartorial symbolism to bridge literary studies, postcolonial theories and fashion studies.

Future research could build upon these findings by exploring the intersections of sartorial symbolism with other postcolonial constructs, such as cultural hegemony, epistemic violence, or subalternity, across various historical and cultural contexts through comparative studies.

References

AKKAYA, Sacide N. Türk romanında self-oryantalizm. **PhD Theis**, Istanbul University: Institute of Social Science, 2020.

ANDI, Kübra. Servet-i Fünûn mecmuası. **Türkiye Araştırmaları Literatür Dergisi**, v. 4, n. 7, pp. 533-544, 2006. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/654866> Last visited: 3 jan. 2025.

ARSLAN, Bahtiyar. Characteristics of the Tanzimat novel and two actors of cultural ambivalence: Felâtun Bey and Bihruz Bey. **Journal of Turkish Language and Literature**, n. 58, v. 2, pp. 229-245, 2018. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.26650/TUDED494448>. Last visited: 4 jan. 2025.

AYSAL, Necdet. Tanzimat'tan Cumhuriyet'e eğitim ve kuşamda çağdaşlaşma hareketleri. **Çağdaş Türkiye Tarihi Araştırmaları Dergisi**, v. 10, n. 22, pp. 3-32, 2011. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/cttdad/issue/25243/266919>. Last visited: 4 jan. 2025.

BAL, Mieke. **Narratology**. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017[1985].

BARTHES, Roland. **Mythologies**. Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: The Noonday Press, 1972.

BARTHES, Roland. **Image, music, text**. Translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.

BARTHES, Roland. **The fashion system**. Translated by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

BEYAZ, Yasin. Yeni Türk Edebiyatı ne kadar yeni? XIX. asır sonrasına dair yeni yaklaşımlar. **Dil ve Edebiyat Araştırmaları**, v. 29, pp. 14-16, 2024. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/3534315>. Last visited: 4 jan. 2025.

BENJAMIN, Walter. On the concept of history. In: ELIAND Howard, and JENNINGS, Michael W. (Eds.). **Selected Writings: Volume 4, 1938–1940**. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003. pp. 389–400.

BENJAMIN, Walter. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2007[1968].

BHABA, Homi K. **The location of culture**. London: Routledge, 2004[1994].

BHANDARI, Nagendra B. Homi K. Bhabha's third space theory and cultural identity today: A critical review. **Prithvi Academic Journal**, v. 5, pp. 171-181, 2022. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.3126/paj.v5i1.45049>. Last visited: 10 sep. 2024.

BUTLER, Judith. **Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity**. New York: Routledge, 1990.

CRAIK, Jennifer. **The face of fashion: cultural studies in fashion**. London: Routledge, 1993.

CRAIK, Jennifer. **Fashion: The key concepts**. Oxford: Berg, 2009.

ÇİFTÇİ, Yusuf. Modernisation in the Tanzimat Period and the Ottoman Empire: An analysis of the Tanzimat Edict within the scope of the modern state. **Uluslararası Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler Dergisi**, v. 2, n. 2, pp. 14-24, 2019. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/914134>. Last visited: 2 jan. 2025.

DAVIS, Fred. **Fashion, culture, and identity**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

DERİNGİL, Selim. "They live in a state of nomadism and savagery": The late Ottoman Empire and the post-colonial debate. **Society for Comparative Study of Society and History**, v. 45, pp. 311-342, 2003. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3879318>. Last visited: 4 jan. 2025.

EKREM, Recaizade M. **Araba sevdası**. Istanbul: Türk Edebiyat Vakfı, 2010[1897].

ECHTNER, Charlotte M., and PRASAD, Pushkala. The context of third world tourism marketing. **Annals of Tourism Research**, n. 30, v. 3, pp. 660-682. Available at: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(03\)00045-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(03)00045-8). Last visited: 10 jan. 2025.

ELDEM, Edhem. The Ottoman Empire and orientalism: An awkward relationship. In: POUILLON, François and VATIN, Jean-Claude (Eds.). **After orientalism: Critical perspectives on Western agency and Eastern re-appropriations**. Leiden: Brill, 2015. pp. 89-102.

EXERTZOGLOU, Haris. The cultural uses of consumption: Negotiating class, gender, and nation in the Ottoman urban centers during the 19th century. **International Journal of Middle East Studies**, v. 35, n. 1, pp. 77-101, 2003. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3879928>. Last visited: 10 jan. 2025.

GOFFMAN, Erving. **The presentation of self in everyday life**. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, 1956.

GOLDEN, Sean. **Orientalism in East Asia: A theoretical model**. Barcelona: Inter Asia Papers, 2009.

GÜNER, Selda. Oryantalizmin ortaçağ Avrupasındaki düşünsel kökenleri: Batı'nın ötekileştirdiği müslüman Doğu. **Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi**, v. 25, n. 1, pp. 57-73. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/huefd/issue/41206/502698>. Last visited: 11 jan. 2025.

GÜRBİLEK, Nurdan. **Kötü çocuk Türk**. Istanbul: Metis, 2012.

GÜRPINAR, Hüseyin R. **Şık**. Istanbul: Özgür, 2012[1889].

HERMAN, David. **Basic elements of narrative**. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

HUNG, Ho-Fung. Orientalist knowledge and social theories: China and the European conception of East-West differences from 1600 to 1900. **Sociological Theory**, n. 21, v. 3, pp. 254-280, 2003. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3108638>. Last visited: 10 jan. 2025.

KAISER, Susan. **Fashion and cultural studies**. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012.

KANDIYOTI, Deniz. Some awkward questions on women and modernity in Turkey. In: ABU-LUGHOD, Lila (Ed.). **Remaking women: feminism and modernity in the Middle East**. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998. pp. 270-287.

KARABULUT, Mustafa. Tanzimat dönemi romanlarında eğlence hayatı, adab-ı muâşeret ve kılık-kıyafet. **Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları**, v. 185, pp. 133-148, 2010. Available at: https://turkoloji.cu.edu.tr/YENI%20TURK%20EDEBIYATI/mustafa_karabulut_tanzimat_roman_kilik_kiyafet.pdf. Last visited: 20 aug. 2024.

KECHRIOTIS, Vangelis. Postcolonial criticism encounters late Ottoman studies. **Historein**, v. 13, pp. 39-46, 2013. Available at: <https://ejournals.epublishing.ekt.gr/index.php/historein/article/download/2256/2090>. Last visited: 10 jan. 2025.

KILIÇBAY, Mehmet A. Tanzimat neyi tanzim etti? **Argos**, v. 15, pp. 57-63, 1989.

KOÇU, Reşat E. *Türk giyim kuşam ve süslenme sözlüğü*. İstanbul: Doğan Kitap, 2015[1967].

KOYUNCU, Derviş T., and TİLTAY, Muhammet A. Tanzimat sonrası Osmanlı toplumunun tüketim kalıplarında meydana gelen değişimin dönemin romanları bağlamında değerlendirilmesi. **Journal of International Management, Education and Economics Perspectives**, v. 5, n. 2, pp. 1-19, 2017. Available at: <https://arastirmax.com/en/system/files/dergiler/286594/makaleler/5/2/arastirmax-tanzimat-sonrasi-osmanli-toplumunun-tuketim-kaliplarinda-meydana-gelen-degisimin-donemin-romanlari-baglaminda-degerlendirilmesi.pdf> Last visited: 15 aug. 2024.

KÜHN, Thomas. Shaping and reshaping colonial Ottomanism: Contesting boundaries of difference and integration in Ottoman Yemen. **Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East**, v. 27, n. 2, pp. 315-331, 2007. Available at: <https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/4/article/220768/summary>. Last visited: 16 jan. 2025.

LIPOVETSKY, Gilles. **The empire of fashion**: Dressing modern democracy. Translated by Catherine Porter. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.

MAKDISI, Ussama. Ottoman orientalism. **American History Review**, v. 107, n. 3, pp. 768-796, 2002. Available at: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/students/modules/hi173/classesandreading/ottomanempire/makdisi_-_ottoman_orientalism.pdf. Last visited: 16 jan. 2025.

MARDIN, Şerif. Power, civil society and culture in the Ottoman Empire. **Comparative Studies in Society and History**, v. 11, n. 3, pp. 258-284, 1969. Available at: https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/178085.pdf?casa_token=tt4w16N1l_wAAAAA:YyTmo1wCkwAGHRcRbWQJ0LRgmLB8kGDKe-ERCCAP5C1-o0ksvjzls6JR6_IBXRr1_KldK6ncvFgwK3JHQCjupcUhNT53uteYmuhTlp_dLkjlqvstBlbLew. Last visited: 16 jan. 2025.

MARDIN, Şerif. European culture and the development of modern Turkey. In: EVIN, Ahmet and DENTON, Geoffrey (Eds.). **Turkey and the European community**. Budrich: Opladen, 1990. pp. 13-23.

MERİÇ, Cemil. **Umrandan uygarlığa**. İstanbul: İletişim Yayınları, 1996.

MITHAT, A. **Felâatun Bey ve Râkım Efendi**. İstanbul: Türk Edebiyat Vakfı Yayınları, 2010[1875].

MUTMAN, Mahmut. The Carriage Affair, or the birth of a national hero. **Monograf**, v. 11, pp. 230-289. Available at: <http://monografjournal.com/sayilar/12/13-mahmut-mutman.pdf>. Last visited: 12 jan. 2025.

NAMLI, Taner. (2019). Tanzimat romanında alafranga züppe eleştirisi. **Adıyaman Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Enstitüsü Dergisi**, v. 31, pp. 188-239. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14520/adyusbd.525110>. Last visited: 10 sep. 2024.

OKAY, Orhan M. **Batı medeniyeti karşısında Ahmet Mithat Efendi**. Ankara: Baylan Matbaası, 1975.

ÖZER, İlbeyi. **Osmanlı'dan cumhuriyete yaşam ve moda**. İstanbul: Truva, 2009[2006].

PARLA, Jale. **Babalar ve oğullar: Tanzimat romanının epistemolojik temelleri**. İstanbul: İletişim, 2014[1990].

ÖZÜDOĞRU, Şakir. **Ottoman costume in the context of modern Turkish fashion design**. In: JANSEN, M. Angela and CRAIK, Jennifer (Eds.). *Modern fashion traditions: Negotiating tradition and modernity through fashion*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016. pp. 121-141.

SAID, Edward W. **Orientalism**. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

TÜRESAY, Özgür. The Ottoman Empire seen through lens of postcolonial studies: A recent historiographical turn. **Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine**, v. 60, n. 2, pp. 127-145, 2013. Available at: https://www.cairn-int.info/load_pdf.php?ID_ARTICLE=E_RHMC_602_0127&download=1. Last visited: 12 jan. 2025.

TÜZEL, Bilge. "Modernliğin" tanzim ettiği gardıroplar: Tanzimat dönemi romanlarında giyim-kuşam. **Gazi Türkiyat**, v. 30, pp. 357-274. Available at: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2517857>. Last visited: 16 jan. 2025.

VEBLEN, Thorstein. **The theory of the leisure class**. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007[1899].

ZÜRCHER, Erik J. **Turkey: a modern history**. Oxford: I. B. Tauris, 2004[1993].

Thanks

I sincerely thank Prof. Dr. Maria Carolina Garcia for encouraging me to develop this research into an article. I also appreciate the anonymous peer reviewers for their thoughtful feedback, which has significantly enriched this work.

Proofreader: Ferhan Kizilepe. Email: fkiziltepe@eskisehir.edu.tr