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## **Hidden Archives, Closeted Desires, Postponed Utopias: Queer ultra-nationalism in Turkish opera Rüstem Ertuğ Altınay**

### **Introduction**

‘A historical picture of the Republic for the sons of Turks; a parable, ghastly and dark’ (Nur 1967a: 1,959).<sup>1</sup> This gloomy note is how the queer Turkish ultra-nationalist politician, medical doctor, historian, translator, poet, essayist, memoirist and playwright Rıza Nur (1879–1942) introduces *Cehennemde Bir Celse* (*A Session in Hell*). Written in 1932, *Cehennemde Bir Celse* is one of the two librettos in the notorious archive Nur created while he was on self-exile in Alexandria and Paris from 1926 to 1938. Set in Hell, this historical horror opera features Nur’s claims about Turkey’s founding president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the country’s formative years (1923–38) defined by a secular Europeanization and nation-building programme—also known as the Kemalist Period after Atatürk. The second libretto in the archive, *Topal Osman* (*Lame Osman*) (1935), is an opera comique celebrating the eponymous militia leader who participated in the Armenian Genocide and the Greek Massacre (Nur 1967b). Nur presents Topal Osman as a national hero who was used and ultimately destroyed by Atatürk.

Rıza Nur’s librettos, when read in the light of the memoirs that formed the backbone of his exilic archive, suggest how operatic writing can function as an undercover strategy of queer self-making. The librettos reveal how archives function not only as repositories but also as sites of production, and how dramatic texts can gain queer dimensions and political significance in relation to other texts. Archives can thus provide crucial insights into discrete theatre practices and create important opportunities to review and revise performance historiographies.

The literature on Turkish people and the opera is dominated by works that analyse the representation of Turks in European opera, often with a focus on the Orientalist, exoticizing and racist undertones in these works (Babaoğlu Balkış 2010; Wolff 2016). The scholarship on Ottoman and Republican Turkish operas, however, remains limited. The existing literature tends to prioritize the development of the genre in the Ottoman Empire and early republican Turkey, often analysing the use of the opera for cultural diplomacy, modernization and nation-building (Kırcı 2004; Yöre 2011; Ayas 2016; Turan 2018). In these works, state-sponsored performances of major operas such as Ahmed Adnan Saygun's *Özsoy (Pure Lineage)* (1934) and *Taşbebek (The Doll)* (1934) or Necil Kazım Akses's *Bayönder (Mr. Leader)* (1932) have received particular attention. While these scholarly debates are undoubtedly important, studying Turks either as exotic elements in a European genre or as (quasi)postcolonial subjects who employed opera for nation-building, modernization, Europeanization or cultural diplomacy falls short of encapsulating the complex political significance of the opera in Turkey. Nur's works reveal how, during a time when the government utilized the genre in the service of an official historiography project, dissident and queer political figures attempted to use the opera to produce alternative accounts of the past and to inspire political action. I discuss how subversive works such as Nur's librettos not only challenged but also reproduced Turkey's official historiography paradigm in the service of alternative utopian projects.

Studying historiography as performative praxis, this essay examines how some contemporary researchers have questioned the authenticity and credibility of Rıza Nur's claims by accusing him of being a spy or by arguing that certain controversial material in the archive, especially Nur's sexual confessions and his claims about the president Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's sexuality, were later added by European intelligence agencies or by leftist intellectuals. Nur's archive reveals how (once) hidden theatre practices exist in a complicated relationship with the claims about covert or clandestine performances in the messy afterlives of such unorthodox archives. The limited scholarly attention his librettos have received suggests how disciplinary and methodological conventions may render dramatic texts invisible even when they are in plain sight. The fundamentally queer nature of the material in Nur's ultra-nationalist, racist and eugenicist utopian archive challenges the popular association of queer utopian performance and literary cultures with the goals of liberal or progressive politics (Dolan 2005; Muñoz 2009). Finally, my research shows

how Nur's notorious archive has gained new lives in the digital age and in the context of Islamic neoliberal authoritarianism in contemporary Turkey.

### **A queer ultranationalist dissident and his hidden archive**

Born as the son of a shoemaker in Sinop in 1879, Rıza Nur's childhood was marked by queer traumas. In his memoirs, a key moment in the author's narration of his gendered subjectivity is his failed performance of masculinity in his youth and the fears this failure created in his family. Nur's interest in music was at the centre of these concerns: 'If I would naturally and unconsciously sing, they would stop and scold me. My father would say "Will you be a *köçek*?" . . . They thought this was about decency and honor' (Nur 1967c: 68). *Köçeks* were young male dancers who entertained men onstage artistically, and offstage romantically and sexually in the Ottoman Empire. By the end of the nineteenth century, the rise of a strict orthodox Islamic dogma that defined same-sex practices as theologically abominable and the encounters with Europe, where the discourse of sexual morality played a key role, had already resulted in the rise of the heteronormative paradigm in the Ottoman Middle East (Ze'evi 2006: 168–9). As same-sex affairs became stigmatized, *köçeks* lost their popularity—not only because of the many proscriptions but also because of the changing tastes under the unprecedented influence of Western Europe in the long nineteenth century (Avcı 2017). The culture of *köçeks* was still alive in Nur's hometown. In the face of the powerful heteronormative discourse, however, the *köçek* had now become an object of concern and the singing young male body was immediately stigmatized by some due to this connection.

While Rıza Nur did suppress his desire to sing, his lifelong interest in music and stage performance persisted (1967c: 68). It is worth noting that his father's classification of singing as a queer practice, which would not be recognized as such by many of Nur's peers, might have made performing arts a latent site of queer performativity for Nur. His librettos, plays and operatic translations may have served as efforts towards queer self-making in a way that is not immediately visible to others. By producing texts instead of performing, however, he kept a safe distance.

Despite his father's disciplinary measures, Rıza Nur narrates that his young body did become an object of desire for men, who verbally harassed and even attempted to rape him (76, 79, 83–4). The only romantic love story in the memoirs is

also about a male friend in Sinop. This undeclared love, Nur claims, disciplined his intellect, refined his perception of nature and inspired him to write poetry (92–4). The subject of Nur’s first long poem, however, was not his friend, but the beauty of an olive grove, and it looked like ‘an innocent boy’s depiction of his love for the nature’ (93). With this personification that only the poet knew, the olive grove replaced the object of queer desire. By detailing this narrative strategy in his memoirs, which he stored together with his librettos and poetry, Nur provides a guide for his readers. He hints that regardless of content, his poetry has its roots in queer desire, and it possibly works as an undercover queer self-making strategy.

Rıza Nur’s account of his same-sex love for his friend is overall favourable, but he still defines this ‘unnatural condition’ as a social ill (93). By emphasizing that his feelings were platonic, and he never confessed them to his friend, Nur assures his readers (and future disciples in a utopian future) that he did not perform any acts that would violate the codes of ‘decency and honour’. In fact, having resisted his emotions, desires and urges by resorting to reason and willpower can be interpreted as the signs of a modern masculinity—in contrast with Nur’s accusations about Atatürk in the librettos and the memoirs. As such, these confessions could help Nur present himself as an even better leader for the Turkish nation. Moreover, Nur’s confessions also bolstered the truth-effect associated with the memoirs and made his accusations about others seem more credible.

As far as we know from Rıza Nur’s memoirs, throughout his life, all his sexual partners were women. Nevertheless, Nur remained wary of the dangers of heterosexual intercourse for men, which he believed to be potentially deadly (Nur 1967d: 458). These concerns possibly informed his operatic translation choices, especially his interest in Ferdinand Lemaire’s libretto for Camille Saint-Saëns’s *Samson et Dalila* (*Samson and Delilah*)—the ultimate castration story. Nur also confesses that he considered castration and gender transitioning, but he gave up on these ideas because he considered eunuchs and women to be weak (1967c: 93; 1967e: 1,530).

As he grew up, the abjection associated with queer subjectivity possibly shaped Rıza Nur’s professional choice as well as his ideological tendencies. Conscious and curious about the body, Nur studied at the Imperial School of Medicine in Istanbul and graduated in 1901. While in medical school, he pursued his interests in literature, poetry and dramatic writing as well. At about that time, Nur

developed an interest in the questions of race and eugenics as well as Turkish nationalism. His racist formulation of Turkish ultra-nationalism would serve as a strategy for Nur to resist the sexual politics of 'national abjection' (Shimakawa 2002). Rather than precariously negotiating the politics of belonging as a queer subject, Nur adopted a racialized conception of Turkishness as an embodied paradigm that would guarantee his belonging. For this reason, early in his memoirs, before any of his sexual confessions, Nur emphasizes his pure Turkish lineage (1967c: 54).

With the re-establishment of constitutional monarchy in 1909, Rıza Nur embarked on a chequered political career marked by alliances and conflicts with different political groups as well as experiences of exile. In 1919, Nur participated in the Independence Struggle, which led to his membership in the Grand National Assembly in Ankara in 1920. Before the Assembly officially established the Republic of Turkey in 1923, Nur served as the Minister of Education, the Minister of Health and the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Following the inception of the Republic, however, Nur's political career failed to progress smoothly. As the single-party regime took an authoritarian turn, Nur left Turkey in 1926, and spent the next twelve years in Paris (1926–33) and Alexandria (1933–8). Nur returned to his beloved motherland only after Atatürk's death in 1938, which would precede his own passing by less than four years.

Today, Rıza Nur is best remembered for the notorious archive he developed in secret while he was in exile. In addition to Nur's librettos—which have almost entirely been ignored in the scholarship and public debates—and his memoirs, the archive also included Nur's will, his nationalistic essays and poetry, his blueprint for Turkey's revivification and his programme for a Turkish ultra-nationalist political party. In their diversity, the documents in Nur's archive were designed to serve a single utopian political project. With his dramatic texts and memoirs, Nur presented an alternative account of the recent past. Nur accused Atatürk and members of the Kemalist elite not only of corruption and treason but also of non-normative sexual practices, such as homosexuality, rape, cuckolding, voyeurism and paedophilia. Among Nur's most notorious claims is that Atatürk's wife Latife Hanım caught him having sex as a bottom with her young diplomat cousin, the eminent novelist Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil's son Vedad (Nur 1967e: 1,357). Even more strikingly, Nur accused Atatürk of raping Latife Hanım's sister and, together with many others around him, sexually abusing his foster sons and daughters (Nur 1967e: 1,895, 1,466 and 1,893). Nur thus

presented the alleged sexual perversity and moral corruption of the Kemalist elite as proof of and, to an extent, as the reason for what he frames as their political corruption, incompetence and failure.

With his ultra-nationalist party programme and his blueprint for Turkey's revivification, Nur reveals his own political vision, which, among many other things, includes establishing a Directorate of Racial Affairs to regulate all realms of life, confining women to the domestic sphere, re-establishing the Caliphate, Turkifying the members of 'foreign races'—especially Kurds—and sterilizing individuals with hereditary diseases, including stutterers (1967f: 1,947, 1,952–3, 1,934–7, 1,927 and 1,954). With such detailed and atrocious strategies, Nur desired to erase the mark of the Kemalist Period of secular Europeanization and nation-building, gain posthumous recognition as a visionary leader and propel the construction of a powerful 'purely Turkish' nation-state.

Nur deposited his rich archive at the British Library in 1935 on the condition that nobody would be allowed to buy the manuscripts, the library would keep them secret in a packet closed with the donor's seal and the manuscripts would not be made available to the readers until 1960 (Meredith-Owens 1965: 45). Other copies were deposited in the Bibliotheque nationale de France in Paris and the Leiden University Libraries in the Netherlands (Oktay 2016: 29). As such, this utopian archive was created for a twice deferred future: the near future when it would be possible to publish and perform the texts and a distant future when the archive could transform Turkish people's understanding of the past and the present as well as their desires and expectations regarding the future. In this utopian project, Nur's librettos played a critical role.

### **The politics of historiography in Turkish opera and theatre**

The popularity of the opera and other European stage performances in the Ottoman Empire increased with the modernization and Europeanization reforms during the Tanzimat (Reorganization) Period (1839–76) (Adak and Altınay 2018: 188). Following the inception of the Republic in 1923, Turkey's secular Europeanization and nation-building programme paid particular attention to fostering the development of European performance forms in the young nation-state. In addition to facilitating Turkey's 'civilizing process' (Elias 2000), theatre and opera also served the Kemalist

historiography programme, which was crucial for the dynamics of nation-building (Ayas 2016).

The Kemalist historiography project aimed to develop the hegemonic narratives regarding both recent and distant past. In constructing the recent past, the official narrative presented Atatürk as the lone saviour and founder of the Republic and focused on legitimizing the authoritarian policies of the single-party regime. Various texts and performances were put in the service of stabilizing this historical framework, the most influential among them being Atatürk's own *Nutuk* (*The Speech*). Initially staged as a thirty-six-hour-long parliamentary speech by the President over a course of six days in 1927, this durational performance was designed to (re)construct the history of the transition from the Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey. Immediately translated into English, French and German, *Nutuk* shaped the academic knowledge production about the period internationally (Zürcher 2010: 175). A number of dissident political figures wrote letters and autobiographies in response to *Nutuk* and its narrative monopoly in the constitution of national history, and Rıza Nur's librettos and memoirs were an initially hidden part of this body of literature (Adak 2007; Sarıtaş 2020). In addition to *Nutuk*, several plays and operas were also written to consolidate the official historiographical narrative.

Beginning with Necmettin Sami's 1922 nationalist play *Sakarya Kahramanları* (*Heroes of Sakarya*), Atatürk emerged as a character in a number of dramatic texts, including biographical plays (Ulusoy Tunçel 2013: 107). There were also works like the opera *Bayönder* (1932), written by Münir Hayri Egeli and composed by Necil Kazım Akses, that adopted a symbolic approach in their narration of Atatürk's life. Revised three times per Atatürk's request, *Bayönder* is a mythical story about a great leader, representing Atatürk, who gives an eternal ideal to his people (Kırcı 2004: 122). There is also a large body of dramatic texts that do not feature Atatürk as a character but include detailed references to the President and even to *Nutuk*, such as Yaşar Nabi's *İnkılap Çocukları* (*Children of the Revolution*) (Nabi 1933: 22–3 and 9).

In the Kemalist historiography programme, formulating an official account of the distant past was at least as important as consolidating a narrative about recent history. In 1930, under the directive of Atatürk, a group of historians developed the

'Turkish History Thesis', which argued that long before the Ottoman Empire, the ancestors of Turks had established advanced civilizations in Central Asia (İnan *et al.* 1930: 50–8). Once environmental circumstances forced them to migrate, these brachycephalic people established civilizations in China, India, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, Anatolia, Greece and Italy. Some researchers have argued that Rıza Nur's (1924-26) earlier historiographical work had probably inspired the Turkish History Thesis (Khachatryan 2015: 75–6).

As a foundational myth, the Turkish History Thesis reframed the Ottoman Empire as a short phase in Turkish history. Seeking to replace the recent memory of collapse with the legend of a golden age, the thesis aimed to serve the Kemalist utopian project of creating a powerful secular, European nation-state. The thesis was designed to facilitate people's investment in the nation-state project also by undermining competing ethnic, religious and national identifications and by providing a racialized sense of belonging. Moreover, the thesis was a methodical response to Western European scientific racism that denied 'whiteness' to Turks. At a time when the borders of the nation-state were still contested, the thesis also aimed to designate Turks as the autochthonous people of Anatolia (Çağaptay 2004: 88).

The ways opera served the Kemalist historiography paradigm is perhaps best demonstrated by *Özsoy* (1934), written by Münir Hayri Egeli and composed by Ahmed Adnan Saygun. The opera was commissioned by Atatürk before a diplomatic visit by Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran. Following the outline provided by Atatürk, the opera incorporated elements from Central Asian and Iranian mythology to present Turks and Iranians as people sharing a historical lineage (Turan 2018: 13). *Özsoy* made explicit references to the Turkish History Thesis as well, including its racial premises (Ayas 2016: 1,064).

In the early Republican opera and theatre, a vital source of inspiration was the epics of the Oghuz Turks, a western Turkic people (Erbek 2020). *Özsoy* also featured a passage directly copied from the epic (Turan 2018: 20). An even more important opera in that regard was Necil Kazım Akses's *Mete*. The opera presented a glorious pre-Ottoman Turkic history by narrating the life of Mete, founder of the empire of the Xiongnu, located in modern-day Mongolia. Mete was a particularly interesting figure because the myth of Oghuz Khagan incorporated



elements from Mete's life and is widely believed to be based on him. In the face of the historical myth that the Oghuz were the ancestors of Turks, the opera presented Mete as an inspiring forefather. As a character who kills his father to establish a powerful monarchy, Mete's life was also a metaphorically interesting story in Kemalist Turkey, where the political elite had rejected the country's Ottoman heritage and exiled the Sultan. In Vehbi Cem Aşkun's 1935 play *Oğuz Destanı (The Epic of Oghuz)*, the metaphor turns into an analogy. Referring to a second Oghuz, Atatürk, Aşkun praises him for defeating two gigantic monsters: the occupation armies and the Sultan (Erol 2012: 1,211). The Oghuz epics continued to inspire Turkish opera composers over the years, as Cengiz Tanç's *Deli Dumrul (Dumrul the Mad)* (1975) demonstrates.

### **A challenge to performance historiography: Rıza Nur's hidden librettos**

The mainstream accounts of performance historiography on Turkey have demonstrated how the opera has served the politics of Europeanization, modernization and nation-building as well as the consolidation of the Kemalist historiographical narrative. Rıza Nur's librettos reveal how dramatic texts in hidden archives can complicate these accounts by showing how dissident intellectuals invested in the opera for different political purposes.

In the introduction to his opera comique *Topal Osman*, Nur claims that the libretto narrates true historical events from 1918 to 1923 (1967b: 1,825). *Topal Osman's* stated goals are 'to keep the name of a Turk who served the nation alive' and 'to teach a lesson to the future generations of Turks about heroism, working for Turkishness and devotion' (ibid.). The work's actual politics, however, are more complicated.

*Topal Osman* opens at the Congress of the Pontic Greek Committee at the American High School in Merzifon, Amasya, in the Black Sea region. The students praise the Americans for their support for Christians in their struggle to destroy Turks and to establish a Greek state. In the second act, the eponymous militia leader Topal Osman mourns the occupation of the Ottoman Empire by the British, French and Greek armies, and claims that the Jews, Ottoman Greeks and Armenians have joined forces against the Turks as well. Topal Osman thus embarks on a struggle to save

the Turks (1,843). Following his successful battle against the Pontic Greeks, members of the parliament send Topal Osman to suppress the Kurdish uprising in Koçgiri, Sivas in Eastern Anatolia (1,858). When Topal Osman's actions begin to disturb Turkish politicians like Ahmet Ferit Tek, Rıza Nur is there to protect and advise the militia leader (1,862–3). In the end, however, despite Rıza Nur's farsighted efforts, Atatürk convinces Topal Osman to murder his opponent Ali Şükrü (1,864–8). The opera ends with Atatürk's chief aide-de-camp Salih Bozok having Topal Osman killed to hide this political scandal (1,879).

*Topal Osman* challenges several conventions in the mainstream dramatic literature in Kemalist Turkey. First, contrary to the tendency to represent Atatürk as the nation's quasi-mythical founding father and lone saviour, the libretto frames him as a violently power-hungry and corrupt politician (1,869). Nur also describes other members of the Kemalist elite as corrupt and incompetent—unlike himself, the voice of wisdom and conscience. As opposed to the dramatic literature's tendency at the time to ignore the internal conflicts and atrocities that enabled the inception of the nation-state, Rıza Nur details these events and legitimizes their violent suppression. The libretto thus serves Nur's utopian project by propagating ultra-nationalism and by proposing an alternative account of the recent past that presents him as a true leader whose ideas should shape Turkey's future.

Nur's political strategies become even more complicated in *Cehennemde Bir Celse*. The libretto's historical critique starts with the title page, where Nur lists Ottoman Turkish nationalist reformists who were exiled and murdered. All these important political figures had died before the events described in the play, leaving no room for confusion. With this list, Nur attempted to align himself with their intellectual, artistic and political heritage. The democrat, reformer journalist and playwright Namık Kemal (1840–88), whom Nur lists as the librettist, was famous for his pioneering nationalist play *Vatan Yahud Silistre (Motherland or Silistra)* (1873), which created patriotic fervour among the audience after its premiere in Istanbul in 1873, resulting in the playwright's arrest and exile (Çekiç 2016: 625). By listing Namık Kemal as the librettist, Nur attempts to provide a historical background and legitimacy to his own political project while also alluding to the sociopolitical transformation he desires to create with his libretto.

*Cehennemde Bir Celse (A Session in Hell)* is set in Hell in an unspecified future when God decides to punish Turks. In order to choose the ideal nemesis to

destroy the Turkish people, the demons organize a meeting where various historical and mythological monsters present themselves and explain why they are the ideal candidate for the job. Jack Halberstam defines monsters as 'meaning machines': 'They can represent gender, race, nationality, class, and sexuality in one body' (1995: 21–2). This representative power also makes monsters time machines. As they produce meaning and affect, these liminal figures shape the ways we think about the past, experience the present and imagine the future. In that regard, Nur's engagement with Oghuz mythology is noteworthy.

Rıza Nur was a great admirer of *Oghuzname*, the Oghuz Khagan epic, which he even proposed as a foundation for a nationalist history education in his party programme (1967f: 1,927). He had also published a transcription of the epic in Latin script as well as its translations in French and modern Turkish (Nur 1928). Hence it is not surprising that the first monsters to appear in response to the Devil's announcement in *Cehennemde Bir Celse* are from the Oghuz mythology: Kayyat (the One-Horned Beast), Tepegöz (the One-Eyed Giant) and Yedi Başlı Ejderha (the Dragon with Seven Heads). Nur thus transforms the heroic legend into a horror story, instilling fear in readers instead of hope. Nur's presentation of these monsters reproduces the Turkish History Thesis's claim that a proto-Turkic civilization is the source of all major civilizations. As he brags about the evil he inflicted on Turks in the past, for instance, Tepegöz says, 'My might would put Rostam [the legendary hero in *Shahnameh* and Iranian mythology] and Hercules to shame' (Nur 1967a: 1,963). This reference to Iranian and Roman mythologies implies a connected history. The implication of weakness and failure, however, distinguishes *Cehennemde Bir Celse* from Özsoy, which also suggested a connected history between Turkey and Iran.

The last and the most fearsome monster in the libretto is Atatürk. At a time when sculptors and photographers worked to develop an iconic image of the President, Nur presents Atatürk with a horn on his forehead and seven dragon heads sprouting from his head, referring to the monsters of *Oghuzname*. As he enters the stage, Atatürk is accompanied by young girls and boys he claims to sexually abuse, including his foster daughters. Rıza Nur was probably aware of the power of this accusation, which combined allegations of rape, paedophilia, bisexuality and fictive incest. For this story to reach a broader audience, Nur also included it in the libretto.

Other figures in Atatürk's abjection corps were bandits and a Romani person. Chosen to personify Atatürk's alleged corruption, the figure of the Romani person indicates Nur's racism. Throughout the libretto, the characters often insult Romani people as well as Jews, Albanians, Kurds and members of the Alevi religious minority. As Atatürk brags about the evil he has already brought upon the Turks, other members of the governing elite join the President, narrating their own contribution to what Nur presents as the demise of Turks. The libretto ends with the purported librettist Namık Kemal coming on to the stage to encourage the army to fight and save the nation—this time from the Kemalist elite. Presenting the history as well as the (then) present in terms of fear, Nur hopes to mobilize the future generations of Turks. Disabusing citizens of the future of what he perceives to be their misperception of history, Nur aims to change their experience of the present as well as their visions and desires regarding the future.

Being aware that he was writing the librettos to be confined to the archive for decades, Rıza Nur took the necessary precautions to make them accessible to his future readers. Since the language reforms gradually erased the ornamental language of Ottoman poetry, he adopted a simple and accessible language (Nur 1967b: 1,825). To make his texts available to future generations, Nur bought a library building in Sinop and donated it to the municipality on the condition that the library would publish his unpublished works. To cover the expenses, he also donated a farm and some land (Taşan 1977: 4). For the same purpose, in 1940 Nur adopted Hüseyin Nihal Atsız, who would later become Turkey's most influential ultra-nationalist intellectual. The adoption deed obliged Atsız to spend Nur's inheritance in the service of Turkism and to publish Nur's works (5). The controversial nature of Nur's archive and the developments in Turkish politics, however, would cause these plans to fail.

### **Assassinations, secret agents and censorship**

The first person to study Nur's archive would be the socialist secular nationalist sociologist Cavit Orhan Tütengil, who encountered the material at the British Library in 1963. Focusing on Nur's party programme and his blueprint for Turkey's revivification, Tütengil's (1965) publications emphasized Nur's role in the development of racism, ultra-nationalism and political Islam that were gaining power in Turkey. Tütengil said little, however, about the archive's sexual content. The

sociologist probably did not want to emphasize these materials because they would distract attention from the issues of immediate political significance.

The Islamist popular historian Kadir Mısıroğlu (under the names Heidi Schmit as the German publisher and Dursun Satılmışoğlu as the Turkish publisher) published the archive in 1967 as a four-volume book named after the memoirs *Hayat ve Hatıratım* (*My Life and Memoirs*). Nur's attacks on Atatürk resulted in a ban on the book soon after its publication. Nevertheless, political and religious groups that utilized Nur's archive for their own political ends—which almost never fully reflected and at times even contradicted Nur's utopian project—continued to circulate the book in secret (Taşan 1977: 7). The few copies left at university libraries gained cult status especially among history students, some of whom—as I know from interviews—were surprised by the factual errors in the memoirs. There were also rumours that the police raided Rıza Nur's apartment right after his death, hoping to find his hidden memoirs (Sofuoğlu 1978: 65).

As he investigated the publication of *Hayat ve Hatıratım*, the eminent leftist secular nationalist journalist Uğur Mumcu realized that both the Turkish and the German publishers' addresses in the book were fake (1993: 81). Tracing the book's sale in Germany, Mumcu discovered that the Saudi-funded Islamist organization Rabitat al-Alam al-Islami (the Muslim World League) published the book in Saudi Arabia and distributed it to Turkish Islamist organizations in Germany for free (84). Selling this edition of *Hayat ve Hatıratım*, according to Mumcu, allowed Turkish Islamist organizations to propagate their views and earn the money to fund their activities (84–5). In 1993, Mumcu was assassinated, and his case was never solved.

It is worth noting that to discredit Rıza Nur, Uğur Mumcu only refers to Nur's misanthropy and his consideration of transitioning (81). This emphasis shows the power of transphobia among Turkey's secular leftist intellectuals at the time. Even more importantly, the case of Rıza Nur demonstrates how queer utopian projects may be ambivalent or antagonistic to the goals of liberal or progressive politics, and how the professed advocates of these values may resort to phobic discourses to discredit their opponents.

*Hayat ve Hatıratım* disturbed not only the critics of ultra-nationalism and political Islam like Cavit Orhan Tütengil and Uğur Mumcu but also people who had sympathy for Nur, probably in part because of his queer confessions. Nur's critics such as Turgut Özakman (1995) referred to his sexual confessions only to discredit

him as a mentally ill person. Nur's advocates, on the other hand, either ignored this content or simply stated that he was not 'a pervert' without any substantiation (Avşar 1992: 8). Others even accused Tütengil of tempering with the contents of Nur's archive. In the introduction to Gülsün DüNDAR's volume *Belgelerle Rıza Nur Gerçeği* (*The Facts About Rıza Nur in the Light of Documents*), the editors noted that the first person to study Nur's archive, Tütengil, was critical of Nur's views, and they perceived this as a 'reason for concern and doubt' ('Önsöz' 1978: 5). Such accusations, combined with Tütengil's criticism of Nur as well as the groups inspired by Nur's political heritage, led to the sociologist's assassination by an ultra-nationalist organization in 1979.

The debates on the authenticity and credibility of Nur's archive have continued to this day. Independent researchers and journalists like Cengiz Özakıncı, Neval Kavcar and Hayri Yıldırım claimed that the memoirs were very different from Nur's other writings in terms of style, and they might have been fabricated by the UK's Secret Intelligence Service—a popular culprit in Turkish conspiracy theories (Oktay 2015: 42–3). The historian Cihan Oktay (2015) has demonstrated that Nur's friends' accounts confirm the existence of the memoirs, and the documents resemble Nur's other texts. Still, while confirming the authenticity of the documents, Oktay also mentioned that Nur did have sympathy for the British, implying that he might have willingly served the interests of the UK (49).

A striking aspect of the literature on Rıza Nur has been the focus on certain materials, mainly the memoirs, at the expense of others, especially the librettos. The librettos in the archive are historical and they focus on the same people and events as the memoirs, including some of the allegations about Atatürk's family that some researchers claim to be later additions to the memoirs (Oktay 2016: 30). Nevertheless, the debates on the authenticity of the archive have ignored the librettos. Other historians who have engaged with Nur's archive, critically or uncritically, have also paid little attention to the librettos. A major reason might be that the dramatic texts are relegated to the category of fiction, and they do not create the same truth-effect as the memoirs do. Theatre and performance scholars, on the other hand, have ignored the librettos probably because they have never been staged and Nur was not a professional playwright. The limited attention Rıza Nur's librettos have received thus demonstrates how disciplinary norms and methodological conventions

may render dramatic texts, including those of high historical and political significance, invisible even when they are easily accessible and in plain sight.

## Conclusion

Rıza Nur's hidden archive, which he developed to invest in a postponed utopian project, evolved into one of the most notorious documents in the history of Turkish literature. The rumours and facts of censorship as well as the performances of secrecy have not simply discredited Rıza Nur's claims about Atatürk and the Kemalist elite or rendered the archive inaccessible. Acquiring these documents through religious or political networks, solving the puzzles to understand censored editions, witnessing the assassinations or learning about the transnational political economy of the publication has also intensified the truth-effect associated with Nur's archive. The case of *Hayat ve Hatıratım* thus reveals how the afterlives of unorthodox archives and hidden theatre practices can become enmeshed in the claims about covert or clandestine performances.

Since 2002, as the successive governments of the economically neoliberal, socially conservative and Sunni Islamist Justice and Development Party have embarked on developing a new official historiography project, Nur's archive has gained renewed significance. This new historiography programme, developed through the collaboration of liberal and Islamist academics, politicians and public intellectuals, defines the history of the Republic as the struggle of democratic Muslim masses against the authoritarian Kemalist military and civilian elite while whitewashing the involvement of conservative nationalist politicians and masses in the atrocities committed during and after the Kemalist Period (Bakiner 2013: 706). This reformulation of recent history is combined with a conservative and Sunni Islamist account of Ottoman history. The discourse of neo-Ottomanism and imperial fantasies have served to legitimize the oppressive political atmosphere in the country as well as the government's over-ambitious desire to gain political influence over former Ottoman lands. In this context, despite the many conflicts between Nur's utopia and the current government's desires for the future, the archive has gained renewed popularity. In the age of the Internet, even the banned 1967 copy of Rıza Nur's memoirs is easily accessible through ultra-nationalist websites while second-hand copies of the 1992 edition can be purchased online. More importantly, social media users now engage in digital performances, and share videos, texts and images

they create with inspiration from Nur's work, including selfies by his grave. Nur's once hidden archive thus continues to play a significant role in Turkish politics.

## Notes

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1 All translations from Turkish are mine unless noted otherwise.

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