The Role of Amanvermez Avni (No Quarter Avni)\textsuperscript{1} in the Construction of Turkish Identity

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A century ago, Ottoman administrators used the term ‘Turk’ as a derogatory term in reference to “the ignorant and uncouth Turkish-speaking peasants of the Anatolian villages.”\textsuperscript{2} Those referred to as Turks by the administrators would have referred to themselves as Muslims, as ideas of Turkish nationalism were still in their infancy. Intellectuals working on ideas of nationalism vacillated between identities which were not yet fixed at the time.\textsuperscript{3} The people of Turkey now refer to themselves as ‘Turks’ with pride. Among a number of forces that brought about this change, was the fictional character Amanvermez Avni, the first Turkish detective hero. Avni, the eponymous protagonist of a series of ten stories, bearing the subtitle “The Turkish Sherlock Holmes,” embodied a number of traits that exemplify a common Turkish identity. These traits include his language abilities, intelligence, cool demeanor, and most significantly, his ability to learn and surpass the capacities of Europeans.

The stories, which were each roughly sixty-four pages long, were written by Ebüssüreya Sami between 1913 and 1914 and published as mass-market novels. They followed a wave of detective stories translated from English and French into Ottoman Turkish beginning in 1881 with Ponson du Terrail’s Les Drames de Paris. Although the stories would have had a limited direct readership because the literacy rate at the time was less than ten percent,\textsuperscript{4} an audience for the stories would have emerged through the coffeehouses of Istanbul and Anatolia. Coffeehouses served as hubs for disseminating information, where literate customers would read newspapers and stories aloud to those in attendance.\textsuperscript{5} Although no research addresses the popularity of Amanvermez Avni in the coffeehouses of the period, it is reasonable to partially explain his popularity with the relationship between the coffeehouse and the printed
word in Anatolia at the time. That *Amanvermez Avni* initiated the genre of Turkish detective fiction and inspired the later anonymous imitations, *Amanvermez Sabri* (1928) and *Amanvermez Ali* (1944), indicates its character’s lasting impact on the Turkish public.

Around the time that Sami wrote *Amanvermez Avni*, the Ottoman Empire had sustained significant losses. The Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 resulted in the loss of most of its European territory. It was during this time of the empire’s decline, accompanied by swirling questions about the future, that the concept of Turkism—hitherto an abstract, largely literary construct—received its first tangible embodiment in Avni, who redefined the meaning of the term ‘Turk.’

Established in 1299 and finally disintegrating after the First World War, the Ottoman Empire had a history of more than 600 years, (during which time it was, in large part, characterized as the main defender of the Islamic faith). Despite this status, the empire held significant territories in Europe, even besieging Vienna on two separate occasions during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. A shift in the balance of power between the Ottomans and the European states led to significant territorial losses in the nineteenth century and the Ottomans, recognizing this, began to adopt European ways. These reforms began with military and educational systems, and eventually encompassed all manner of cultural material including music, clothing, and literature in translation.

The period of identity formation began in earnest after both the Serbian Revolts at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the Greek War of Independence, which began in 1821 and ultimately ended when independence was officially granted by the Treaty of Constantinople in July 1832. These conflicts and losses, combined with general European encroachment on Ottoman territory, provided
the grounds for future Chief Administrative Officer of the Ottoman Empire, Arif Efendi, to begin to question the future of the Ottoman Empire. In 1822, he suggested that the dangers facing the empire posed three possible options: first, to remain, in his words, “faithful to the command of God and the law of Muhammad…[and] defend to the last what provinces we still retain,” second, withdraw to Anatolia, or third, be reduced to slavery. As such, with striking accuracy, Arif Efendi predicted the action Mustafa Kemal would take in establishing the Republic of Turkey in Anatolia a century later, but in 1822, Arif Efendi counselled the declaration of Holy War and a fight to the end.

The Ottoman administration did not take Arif Efendi’s advice, however, and desiring to secure European assistance against the invasion of Muhammad Ali from Egypt, they proclaimed the Imperial Rescript in November 1839. In this rescript, the Ottoman administration outlined their proposed reorganization, and thus, established the period referred to as the Tanzimat, or ‘Reorderings.’ The proposed reforms centered on justice and finance, but the specific change of interest to this writer came into effect with the promulgation of a new penal code in May of 1840, which affirmed for the first time the “equality of all Ottoman subjects before the law.” These developments met the short-term goals of the empire by securing the support of Great Britain, Austria, Russia, and Prussia against Muhammad Ali, but they ushered in a period of uncertainty regarding identity.

This new equality did not appeal to the Anatolian Muslims of the empire who had been used to an institutionalized level of superiority over non-Muslims. The Ottoman Empire was founded as a Muslim empire and non-Muslims were allowed to remain in their lands and live in peace framed by the understanding that they were the minority. This sudden claim of equality in the Tanzimat era discarded the entire basis
of the power structure of the empire and Muslim Turks were both confused and frustrated by it.⁸

Ottomanism, “a common Ottoman citizenship and loyalty, irrespective of religion or origin,”⁹ rested on the political concept of identity promoted by nineteenth-century reformers in the wake of the aforementioned legal changes of 1840. It was an effort made largely by the Ottoman administrators of Istanbul to convince other budding nationalisms to remain part of the empire and to win Anatolian Turks over to the new basis of the empire. The strength of Ottomanism was its concept of identity, which did not necessarily exclude any group in the empire. However, it lacked tangible unifying characteristics and was no match for the nationalism that was embraced by the empire, causing Christians to think of themselves not as Ottomans, but as Greeks, Bulgars, Serbs, and Armenians.¹⁰

With the subsequent uprisings in the last quarter of the century by the Bulgars (1876), the Armenians (1890s), and in Crete (1896-1897), it was clear that fledgling nationalisms could result in the dissolution of the empire. It is at this time that an identity based on religion (Islamism) was gaining support.¹¹ More exclusive than Ottomanism, Islamism had the stronger foundation of religion on which to construct a concept of identity that would act as a stronger unifying force in the empire. The problem with Islamism was that the Jews and Christians in the empire were completely excluded.

In 1904, in an effort reminiscent of Arif Efendi’s assessment of the Ottoman future, Yusuf Akçura presented another evaluation. Entitled Three Ways of Policy, and sometimes referred to as the ‘Manifesto of Turkism,’ this report assessed the potential for success of both Ottomanism and Islamism. Finding them both to be failures, Akçura presented the alternative of Turkism, which, as focused on the
Turkish-speaking population of the empire, presupposes a withdrawal into Anatolia. Akçura, thus, came to accept Arif Efendi’s second option, but he did so with the unifying theory of Turkism, which Arif Efendi could not have predicted.

One of the main problems with Akçura’s Turkism was its notion of unity for a people that was based on a term with negative connotations. Yet a reassessment of ‘Turk’ had already begun; poet Mehmed Emin initiated this trend in 1897 with his *Turkish Poems*, in which he states: “I am a Turk, my faith and my race are mighty,” and “[w]e are Turks, with this blood and with this name we live.” This was the beginning of a groundswell and further cultural and historical attempts to re-evaluate the concept of ‘Turk.’ It was vital to the later establishment of the Republic of Turkey as ninety percent of its land is Anatolia. The drive to re-evaluate the term ‘Turk’ was two-fold: first, it aimed to make the Turkish-speaking Muslims of Anatolia see themselves with pride, and second, it strove to encourage the Turkish-speaking Ottoman administrators both to gain respect for Anatolians more positively and to identify themselves with these people in order to unite against a common enemy: the colonial European powers.

Discussion of politics had been severely limited under the reign of Sultan Abdülhamid II (1876-1909) as he imposed strict censorship over the press. This censorship was reduced dramatically after 1908 when writers began, once more, to address political issues. The foreign policies of England, France, Russia, and Germany attracted a great deal of attention. Seen as being interested only in pursuing their own interests, England, France, and Russia were portrayed as vultures trying to tear apart the empire. Germany, without a long, colonial history and with sentiments and policies favourable towards Muslims, was portrayed in a much more positive light.
In this context, *Amanvermez Avni* made a lasting impression on Turkish detective fiction. What was it about *Amanvermez Avni* that captured the imagination? To begin with, Avni never failed, even when it came to cases or villains that other detectives had grappled with unsuccessfully. Also, like Sherlock Holmes, Avni was portrayed as a real person: descriptions of his house, surroundings, and the policy he contended with were all accurate reflections of reality. Sami also establishes another foundational link between Avni and Sherlock Holmes: Avni’s apprentice, Arif, like Holmes’s friend, Dr. Watson, acts as a vehicle for both revering Avni and for explaining the detective’s quick observations and razor-sharp reasoning to the reader.

Prominent in the original title, in a font larger than the one used for the name *Amanvermez Avni*, is Avni’s sobriquet, “the Turkish Sherlock Holmes.” By analysing the character of Avni, we can see the type of character traits promoted by Sami as worthy of a ‘Turk.’ In the first story, Sami establishes that Avni reads both Turkish and French newspapers. We later learn that Avni not only reads Turkish and French, but also Greek and Armenian. Furthermore, through Avni’s penchant for disguise, we learn that he speaks each of these languages with the facility of a native speaker. This language ability is extended to Arif, as demonstrated in the second story, *The Death of Kamelya*, when the two, together disguised as Greeks, are “walking down the street speaking Greek.” Then later, in the sixth story, *Blue Eye*, Avni adopts a second apprentice, Anderya, who speaks Turkish, Russian, and Greek. However, back in the second story, Avni’s vast language abilities are circumscribed slightly. In order to catch the murderer who has fled, Avni travels to Constanta, Romania and faces communication difficulties because he does not speak Romanian. But again, in the third story, *The Winged Carriage*, Sami emphasizes Avni’s daily reading of Turkish,
French, Greek, and Armenian newspapers, which helps him to obtain vital information he uses for solving crimes. This can be seen as an encouragement of Turkish literacy during a time when it was less than ten percent. Through Avni, Sami also encourages attention to detail in the speaking of Turkish and celebrates those who speak the language politely and with an Istanbul accent: we see an example when Avni asks a blindfolded witness, “How did he speak?” to which she answers, “Very politely and refined,” after which Avni’s immediate and correct conclusion is that the speaker was from Istanbul.

Quick observations and correct conclusions are the cornerstone of another of Avni’s traits: his intelligence. This quality is exemplified early in the first story, *The Burnt Man*, when Avni distinguishes himself from the other officers at the crime scene with his poignant observations. In the fourth story, *The Dark Killer*, Avni correctly contradicts the doctor’s findings at the conclusion of an autopsy, which had attributed the death to a blocked artery. He demonstrates that the death was, in fact, a murder by poison, which amazes the doctor and causes him to declare that both Avni and Arif are *djinn* because of their superior intelligence. In the eighth story, *The Painter*, Avni’s intelligence manifests in a Houdini-like escape. Trapped in a burning building, he directs the fire to a small pile of gunpowder he has positioned under the locked door, blowing the door off its hinges.

This escape under pressure leads to a discussion of Avni’s cool temper. The fire motif is repeated in *The Dark Killer*, when arsonists burn down Avni’s house. During this misadventure, Sami writes that Avni behaved “in a cool-headed manner.” Furthermore, throughout the stories, Avni falls into potentially life-threatening traps and, in each and every case, maintains his composure, escapes, and captures the criminal.
This is, presumably, why Avni is infamous amongst the administration, the police, and the criminals, boasting an incredible success rate, evident in Avni’s services being specifically requested by the police in two of the stories: *Silent Gun* and *Among the Skeletons*. Yet again, in *The Painter*, Avni is called upon to take on a super criminal named Ligor who has for years confounded both the gendarmerie and the Governor’s Office of Beyoğlu, the traditionally European part of Istanbul. Avni declares that he will capture Ligor within the week and does. In the climax, Sami describes the Avni-Ligor confrontation as follows: “It was a terrific sight: the empire’s most talented detective face-to-face with the city’s most fearsome robber.”

In the ninth story, *Deceased*, the criminals, who think Avni is dead, gleefully declare, “now we can do whatever we want!” Of course, faking his death was merely a ploy for Avni to distract and capture the criminals.

Indeed Avni is so successful that other characters in the story compare him to famous European detectives such as Sherlock Holmes and Monsieur Lecoq. The most prominent comparison to Sherlock Holmes is Avni being called “the Turkish Sherlock Holmes.” Using a European reference is not surprising considering the widespread adoption of European ways—from legal to financial to cultural—during the Tanzimat period. So it is, in a way, natural for Ebüssüreya Sami to refer to his detective hero as “the Turkish Sherlock Holmes.” But Sami takes this one step further, he portrays Avni as one who has learned from Europe, much like the empire of the previous century, but who then goes on to surpass Europe’s brightest thinkers. An example of this appears in the first story, *The Burnt Man*, when the doctor at the crime scene says of Avni, “That man is probably Lecoq’s apprentice!” to which the police commissioner replies, “It looks like he’ll be giving lessons to Lecoq in a couple of years.” Once again in *Blue Eye*, the criminal is described as one with a record that
would best any of the criminals of Xavier de Montepin or Ponson du Terrail. Thus, Sami cleverly places himself, the fictional criminals, and Avni, who apprehends every said criminal, ahead of the Europeans. In a period in which the term ‘Turk’ referred to one of low intellect, this is a grand statement. Sami is, in effect, saying to the Turks: “yes, the Europeans have taught us many things, but we have mastered them and now it is our time to surpass them.” This is the message of Amanvermez Avni. It implies that, for intelligent Turks, the ability to master languages and remain cool-headed will bring success.
The Turkish word *amanvermez* has no clear equivalent in English. It directly translates as ‘without mercy’ or ‘merciless,’ but does not carry the negative connotation that it does in English. A more fitting translation of *amanvermez* is “no quarter” and thus an English title that I have proposed is “No Quarter Avni.”


7 Ibid, 109.

8 Ibid, 139.

9 Ibid, 326.

10 Nationalist uprisings against the Ottoman Empire that exemplify this trend include that of the Serbs (1804-1813), the Greeks (1821-1830), the Bulgars (1876), and the Armenians (1890s).


12 Lewis, *Emergence*, 327.

13 Ibid., 343.

14 With the literacy rate of less than ten percent amongst Anatolians, this author feels that many of these pro-Turk stories and poems were, as assumed with *Amanvermez Avni*, read aloud in coffee shops of Anatolia, but there is no evidence to support or contradict this.


16 Eraslan, 28-30.

17 Üyepazarcı, *Korkmayınız Mr. Sherlock Holmes*, 178.

18 Ibid, 181.


26 *Djinn* are a class of spirits, lower than the angels, capable of appearing in human form.


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