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Ottoman Odyssey: Exploring Identity, Culture and Belonging in the *Magnificent Century*

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Abstract: The *Magnificent Century* (*Muhtesem Yüzyıl*) was a popular Turkish historical drama television series that aired from 2011 to 2014. The series is set in the 16th century during the peak of the Ottoman Empire. The series follows the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, the longest-reigning Sultan of the Ottoman Empire and his wife, Hürrem Sultan, the first Haseki Sultan of the Empire. The show brings to life their personal relationships, power struggles, and the political intrigue of the imperial court. This research paper analyses the show's narrative strategies, characters, and cultural representation to explore identity, culture, and belonging within the Ottoman Empire. It argues that the series offers a revisionist view of history, challenging traditional accounts of the Ottoman Empire. It also examines the portrayal of historical figures, events, and cultural practices, considering their influence on Ottoman historiography and cultural memory. The study highlights the significance of the *Magnificent Century* as a cultural text that reinterprets Ottoman history and offers a fresh perspective on the past.

Keywords: *Historical Drama, Ottoman History, Turkish Identity, Cultural Representation, Narrative Strategies*

Introduction

Historical dramas serve as a powerful medium for exploring and reimagining the past, offering a lens through which to understand the complexities of history, culture, and identity. These narratives, often blending fact and fiction, not only entertain but also shape collective memory and cultural identity. Among the many historical dramas that have captured global attention, *The Magnificent Century (Muhtesem Yüzyıl)* stands out as a significant cultural text that reinterprets the Ottoman past. This study analyses the series as a site of cultural negotiation where historical discourse is reimagined for a modern audience, investigating how the narrative negotiates the tensions between tradition and modernity through its depiction of political power, gender roles, and cultural representation.

SULEIMAN: I am Suleiman, the one who became the crown prince and governor of Manisa at the age of 16, the one who strives to shoulder his father Sultan Selim's honourable inheritances, who promised to keep justice at every step he takes, the tenth sultan of the Ottoman Empire. (Episode 1;10:35)

The *Magnificent Century* presents a fresh perspective on the Ottoman Empire by focusing on the life and reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent, one of the most prominent rulers of the Ottoman Empire. It also highlights the journey of Hurrem Sultan (Alexandra Roxelana), who rose from Jariye to become one of the most powerful women in Ottoman history. The series vividly captures the political intrigues, cultural dynamics, and personal struggles of the 16th-century Ottoman Empire. More than a historical drama, it is a revisionist narrative that challenges traditional historiography and reinterprets the Ottoman past. The series reinterprets Ottoman history by exploring themes of power, loyalty, ambition, and love. At the same time, it sparks discussions about identity, culture, and belonging in both historical and modern contexts.

Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (r. 1520-1566) was the longest-reigning and one of the most celebrated sultans of the Ottoman Empire. His rule marked a period of territorial expansion, legal reforms, and flourishing arts and architecture, earning him a revered place in Ottoman historiography. The series *Magnificent Century*, however, goes beyond his political and military achievements to explore his personal relationships, particularly his deep connection with Hurrem Sultan. The show depicts Hurrem's extraordinary journey from concubine to Suleiman's legal wife, a position that granted her immense political power and influence. This portrayal challenges traditional historical narratives by presenting a more nuanced understanding of Hurrem's role, moving beyond simplistic stereotypes.

The *Magnificent Century* sparked widespread debate and discussion both within Turkey and internationally. While praised for its challenging narrative and impressive visuals, it also faced criticism for its historical inaccuracies and portrayal of certain characters. Despite the controversies, the series profoundly impacted popular culture. It contributed to the global popularity of Turkish television and renewed interest in Ottoman history. Its success highlights the enduring fascination with the Ottoman Empire and its legacy. It proves the power of historical dramas in shaping public perception of the past. This paper analyses *Magnificent Century* as a cultural text that reinterprets Ottoman history and identity. The study examines narrative techniques, character portrayals, and the show's revisionist approach to history, focusing on political power, gender roles, and cultural representation. It also explores the show's impact on Turkish national identity, historical memory and global perceptions of the Ottoman past.

The Ottoman Empire, once one of the world's most powerful and multicultural states, has remained a complex symbol in Turkish historical consciousness. Since the dissolution of the empire in 1922 and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923, interpretations of the Ottoman past have shifted. Turkey's official narrative distanced itself from the Ottoman legacy for much of the 20th century under the influence of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's secular reforms emphasising modernisation and Westernisation. However, recent decades have witnessed a revival of Ottoman identity in Turkish media, politics, and public discourse. *The Magnificent Century* is a prime example of this revival, presenting an image of the empire that aligns with contemporary Turkish nationalism while also appealing to an international audience.

The Ottoman Empire experienced significant political expansion, economic growth, and cultural advancements during the 16th century under the rule of Sultan Suleiman. The *Magnificent Century* is situated within this historical background to tell a story about the complexities and political rivalries of Sultan Suleiman's court. It employs various narrative strategies, including political intrigues, character-driven subplots, and dramatic tension, to create an engaging story that blends historical events with fictional elements. The characters in the show undergo significant transformations throughout the series, reflecting themes of ambition, love, and resilience.

In the show, Sultan Suleiman, played by Halit Ergenc, is portrayed as a complex character who struggles to balance his responsibilities as a ruler with his personal feelings. Historically, he was known for expanding the Ottoman Empire and enacting legal reforms, but the series adds depth by exploring his inner conflicts. His relationship with Hürrem is central to his characterisation, illustrating how love influences his decisions. In a pivotal scene, he reassures her, "You are not just my love, Hürrem. You are my destiny." This line encapsulates the emotional weight of their bond and the extent

to which personal relationships impact political choices. At the same time, the show does not shy away from depicting his ruthless side. His order to execute his son, Prince Musthafa, is one of the most tragic scenes in the series. Suleiman's ultimate decision to order his son's death stems from longstanding Ottoman practices that prioritised state stability over familial bonds. The series adds emotional depth to the event by portraying Suleiman's anguish as he watches Musthafa's strangulation from a hidden chamber. The scene underscores the brutal reality of leadership in a system that prioritised continuity of rule over personal attachment.

The series also effectively depicts the political power struggles in the imperial court. The imperial court is portrayed as a battlefield where loyalty and betrayal determine one's survival. The rivalry between Ibrahim Pasha, Suleiman's Grand Vizier, and Hurrem Sultan exemplifies this dynamic. Initially, Ibrahim was a trusted advisor and childhood friend of Sultan Suleiman, holding significant influence over state affairs. However, as Hurrem gains power, their relationship becomes increasingly strained. The series dramatizes Ibrahim's downfall, culminating in his execution, a turning point that showcases the unpredictability of power in the Ottoman Empire. In one of his final scenes, he reflects, "Once you have touched power, it is impossible to live without it. But power is like the sun- it burns those who dare to get too close." His fate reinforces the central theme that political ambition can lead to one's downfall even when managed carefully.

Hurrem Sultan, a central figure in both the Ottoman Empire and the TV show, was originally a Slavic concubine named Roxelana. She broke with tradition by becoming Suleiman's legal wife and gaining significant political power, which caused tension within the palace. The show portrays her as a skilled strategist, navigating the intricate politics of the harem and state affairs. Although historical records offer limited information about her personal life, the series reimagines her journey as one marked by ambition, intelligence, and resilience, making her one of the most memorable characters in television history. Hurrem's rise to power from a captive to the most powerful woman in the empire is a captivating storyline in the series. In contrast to the usual portrayal of Ottoman women as passive, Hurrem is depicted as a strategist actively shaping her destiny. The conflict in the harem is fueled by her rivalry with Mahidevaran Sultan, Suleiman's first consort and the mother of Shehzade Musthafa. In an early confrontation, Mahidevran warns her, "You are nothing but a passing shadow. The Sultan's heart will return to me." Hurrem, undeterred, responds, "A shadow grows in power when the light shines on it. And I will make sure it never fades." This exchange highlights her determination and foreshadows her eventual victory over Mahidevran.

Hurrem's story exemplifies how the harem was not a place of passive confinement but a political battlefield. Her rise was not simply due to love; it was a calculated maneuver within a highly

structured harem system. She rewrote the rules of power by securing the Sultan's favour, bearing sons, and eliminating her rivals. Hurrem's influence extends beyond personal conflicts; she played a role in politics, using her position to secure power for her children. The series reframes her as a powerful woman who used intelligence and resilience to navigate the male-dominated world of the imperial court.

The portrayal of Hurrem Sultan challenges conventional notions of female subordination by functioning as an embodiment of Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity. Her rise to power demonstrates how gender roles are not innate but are constructed through repeated acts of assertion, manipulation, and strategic alliances. As Butler states, "Gender is not something that one is, it is something one does, an act...a 'doing' rather than a 'being'" (Butler, 25). In contrast to traditional concubines, Hurrem actively redefined her role, creating a new identity that defied patriarchal norms through performance. Furthermore, her depiction interacts with Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze; while the series emphasizes her beauty, she subverts the passive or female split by using her desirability as a tool for political agency. By dictating her own narrative through charm and intelligence, Hurrem transitions from a passive object of pleasure to an active agent of power.

Cultural representation in the series is evident in its language, costumes, and setting. The grandeur of the Ottoman court is recreated through elaborate costumes inspired by 16th-century fashion, featuring intricate embroidery, luxurious fabrics, and distinct headpieces. The use of Ottoman Turkish phrases, combined with a dramatic yet formal tone, adds authenticity to the dialogue. The setting, ranging from the opulent interiors of Topkapi Palace to the bustling markets of Istanbul, reinforces the historical atmosphere. The series accurately portrays court life, emphasising the palace's role as a hub of politics and diplomacy. It also showcases the harem's political significance, where women like Valide Sultan, Haseki Sultan, and other concubines played essential roles in shaping imperial politics. Conflicts within this domain often influenced succession struggles and political decisions, reflecting the broader dynamics of governance in the empire.

The harem, often imagined as a place of luxury and leisure, was in reality a complex political institution where power was negotiated behind the closed doors of the imperial palace. In the series, the harem is portrayed not just as a space of domesticity but as the heart of Ottoman court politics, where alliances were forged, rivalries intensified, and the future of the empire was shaped. The hierarchy within the harem was strict; at the top stood Valide Sultan (Queen Mother), who exercised authority over the sultan's concubines and children. Beneath her were the sultan's favourite consorts, each vying for influence, and below them were low-ranking concubines, who either faded into obscurity or rose through careful strategy. The series captures this intricate system by focusing on the

conflicts between Hurrem Sultan and Mahidevran Sultan, highlighting how survival in the harem depended as much on wit and intelligence as on beauty and charm. The series does not shy away from depicting the cruelty of these struggles, whether through banishments, secret alliances, or the fate of sons caught in succession disputes. These conflicts were part of a larger system where women exerted agency in a patriarchal structure through intelligence, loyalty, and sometimes, ruthless ambition.

The *Magnificent Century* had a profound impact on cultural memory and national identity. In Turkey, the show reignited public interest in Ottoman history, sparking debates about historical accuracy and representation. The series also redefined Turkey's relationship with its imperial heritage, reflecting a broader cultural shift toward embracing Ottoman identity in contemporary discourse. The representation of the Ottoman Empire in the *Magnificent Century* aligns with Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, which argues that national identities are constructed through shared myths and historical narratives. Anderson explains, "Nations are imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members. yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson 6). The show actively participates in the construction of Ottoman nostalgia, portraying Suleiman's reign as a golden age that embodies imperial strength, wisdom, and cultural sophistication. This revisionist approach reinforces a sense of national pride, particularly in contemporary Turkey, where Ottoman history is increasingly celebrated as part of national identity.

The show introduced Ottoman history to a global audience internationally, reshaping perceptions of the empire beyond traditional Western narratives. Its success in the Middle East, the Balkans, and Latin America highlights the universal appeal of historical dramas exploring themes of power, ambition, and betrayal. Its portrayal of the Ottoman Empire as a sophisticated and multicultural civilization counters long-standing Orientalist stereotypes, offering a more nuanced representation of one of history's most influential empires. In the series, Sultan Suleiman is depicted as a conqueror and statesman as well as a philosopher-king who embodies justice, wisdom, and strategic foresight. His famous declaration, "I am not merely a sultan who holds power. I am the shadow of God on Earth, entrusted with justice and righteousness", reflects an idealized version of Ottoman leadership. This depiction aligns with modern attempts to reclaim Ottoman history as a source of national pride, moving away from outdated negative stereotypes of Ottoman rule as despotic or tyrannical.

The show also interacts critically with Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, which argues that Western narratives have historically framed the East as exotic, decadent, and despotic. Said asserts that the Orient is often reduced to a "theatrical setting where the West is always the spectator, and the Orient the spectacle" (Said, 63). *The Magnificent Century* resists this by depicting Ottoman characters

as complex, strategic thinkers rather than reducing them to stereotypes of cruelty or overindulgence. However, the series remains a complex negotiation, as certain elements of over-dramatized court intrigue still engage with Orientalist aesthetics even as they attempt to reinforce a more nuanced, strategic Ottoman identity.

Conclusion

The Magnificent Century functions as more than mere entertainment; it is a landmark historical drama that redefines how the Ottoman Empire is remembered and represented. By merging history with contemporary storytelling, the series offers a revisionist lens through which viewers can engage with the legacy of the empire, challenging traditional historiographical accounts and reinterpreting Ottoman identity. Its global success demonstrates its role in bridging the gap between history and entertainment, making the past relevant to contemporary audiences and serving as a reminder that history is not merely a collection of facts but a living narrative shaped by interpretation and collective memory.

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