

The *Afrodit* Case: The Popular Perception of Literature and Obscenity in Turkey at the Beginning of the Second World War

Afrodit Davası: İkinci Dünya Savaşı'nın Başında Türkiye'de Edebiyat ve Müstehcenliğin Toplumsal Algısı

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Abstract

In 1939, Nasuhi Baydar, a Turkish Grand National Assembly member, translated Pierre Louys' *Afrodit*. The novel was banned for obscenity, sparking widespread protests as well as public interest. The trials resulting from the novel's banning were sometimes held in the presence of as many as 5,000 protestors. As the debates over the value of an obscene novel continued to rage, the scope for discussions widened, with the case becoming part of the ongoing struggle between "revolutionary modernists" and opposing "reactionaries." Ultimately, the debate over the novel's alleged obscenity transformed into "nothing but fuel for constructing communities."

Even amidst significant events like the 1939 Erzincan earthquake and the Soviet annexation of Finland, the *Afrodit* case dominated media headlines and completely captured public attention. After the acquittal of the book's publisher, more than four different translations of the novel appeared on the market, significantly increasing its sales volume. Even before the acquittal, some pirated editions or other books using the same title were sold by street peddlers until midnight.

This paper aims to demonstrate how Turkey's intellectuals engaged in their political and ideological struggle during the Second World War by mobilizing the public over a trial regarding a piece of supposedly obscene literature.

Keywords: *Afrodit*, Banned books, Intellectual history, Obscenity, Pierre Louys, Public sphere, Turkey

Öz

1939 yılının sonunda, milletvekili ve edebiyatçı Nasuhi Baydar, Pierre Louys'un *Afrodit* adlı romanını çevirir. Roman kısa zaman içerisinde müstehcen olduğu gerekçe gösterilerek yasaklanır ve bu durum büyük bir toplumsal ilgiyle karşılaşır. Bu ilginin sonucunda müstehcen bir kitap davası bazen beş bin kadar protestocunun katılımına sahne olur. Müstehcen bir romanın değeri üzerine süren tartışmalar genişledikçe, bu dava "devrimci modernistler" ile karşıt "gericiler" arasındaki süregelen mücadelelerin bir parçası haline gelir. Sonuç olarak, romanın iddia edilen müstehcenliği üzerine yapılan tartışmalar, birbirine karşıt "cemaatlerin" oluşumuna yol açar.

1939 Erzincan Depremi, Sovyetler Birliği'nin Finlandiya'yı işgali ve karaborsa gündemin en önemli konuları olması gerekirken, *Afrodit* Davası toplumda ilgiyi daha fazla üzerine çekmekteydi. Kitabın ve yayıncısının beraat etmesinin ardından, piyasada dört farklı çeviri daha ortaya çıkar ve büyük ilgi görür. Davanın beraat ile sonuçlanmasından önce, bazı korsan baskılar veya aynı başlığı kullanan diğer kitaplar, sokak satıcıları tarafından bile satılır.

Bu makale, Türkiye'deki ideolojik ve entelektüel bir müstehcen tartışmaya dönüşen müstehcen olma iddiasıyla yargılanan bir edebiyat eseri üzerinden gelişen bir dava etrafında yaşanan toplumsal mobilizasyonun, İkinci Dünya Savaşı sırasında nasıl siyasi ve ideolojik bir ayrıma karşılık geldiğini göstermeyi amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Düşünce Tarihi, Kamusal alan, Müstehcenlik, Pierre Louys, Türkiye, Yasak kitaplar

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Today, in Turkey, not many people know about the book *Afrodit* or its writer Pierre Louys.¹ If you search for the book in a bookstore, you will not find it because it is out of print.² However, during the first years of the Second World War, everyone had something to say about the book and its writer, and by April 1940, you could find four different translations of the book in bookstores or even on the streets sold by peddlers.³ During the first years of the Second World War, the book became popular due to its prohibition for being deemed obscene by Istanbul's attorney general. The *Afrodit* case first attracted the attention of the foremost writers of the period and then the public. From December 1939 to April 1940, the *Afrodit* case was one of the most popular events in the media.

What made these writers and the people become deeply concerned about this case and the problem of literature and obscenity in general? What prompted such sensitivity toward prohibiting a piece of literary material that was defined as "obscene"? This article seeks to answer these questions. The popular perception of literature and obscenity, in general, is examined by scrutinizing one of the most popular cases of the period. By considering the reactions to the *Afrodit* case, this study further investigates the importance of literature as a public sphere for intellectual resistance during the single-party period in Turkey.

The Case

In November 1939, Istanbul's attorney general prohibited the publication of Pierre Louys' *Afrodit*, which was translated into Turkish by Nasuhi Baydar. The translator was a member of parliament from Malatya, who had previously been Minister of Sports and was also the editor-in-chief of the state-sponsored newspaper *Ulus*. The first news of the case appeared in December 1939 in almost all newspapers. In the *Afrodit* case, the court based its ruling on the expertise of İbrahim Hakkı Konyalı, who was an art historian rather than a litterateur. He was also known as the discoverer of the map of Piri Reis from the archives of Topkapı Palace (Korok, 1940: 4).⁴ During the first trial, Semih Lütü Erciyaş,

1 Hailing from an aristocratic family, Pierre Louys (1870–1925) was a French novelist and lyric poet. Although he had a specific education, he did not choose a profession for himself. Instead, influenced by Leconte de Lisle in particular, he became interested in literature. He became active alongside symbolists, such as Heredia, Mallarme, and Verlaine; founded *Le Comque*, the newspaper of this movement, in 1890; and befriended the young Andre Gide. In his art, he primarily dealt with the Ancient Hellenic world. His most well-known work is *Chanson de Bilitis* (Songs of Bilitis, 1894), which consists of songs of a gentle prostitute from Mytilene. The main subject of *Aphrodite* (1896) is similar to the Songs of Bilitis.

2 The latest translation of *Aphrodite: moueurs antiques* (1896), *Afrodit-Aşk Tanrıçası'nın Entrikaları*, is by Çağdaş Dedeoğlu (2014). However, this was re-translated from the English translation of Louys' book, not from its original French version.

3 These four versions are as follows: *Afrodit-Eski Adetler* (1940), trans. Nasuhi Baydar; *Afrodit* (1940), trans. Kâ-Gü; *Hakiki Afrodit-Eski ahlak ve adetler* (1940), trans. Dâniş Remzi Korok; *Afrodit-Eski Örf ve Adetler* (1939), trans. Avni İnel. Although the last version is dated as 1939, it can be understood from the back cover that it was published after the case ended. However, the publisher and the translator wanted to distance themselves from this prohibited translation. According to the back cover, they were the first to translate the book into Turkish but postponed publication due to various difficulties. This translation was finished in 1937, long before the prohibition of Nasuhi Baydar's version. To stress their precedence, they dated the book as 1939. The first translation was prohibited and became the subject of the case. The others were published after the book's acquittal. Kâ-Gü's translation was also prohibited, although on a different pretext. It was prohibited because it was published before the trial's result. The publisher tried to gain advantage from the book's popularity before the translation was republished that the case dealt with (*Akşam*, March 12, 1940; *Tan*, March 9, 1940).

4 For the study of Konyalı in which the maps of Piri Reis are mentioned, see Konyalı (1936). İbrahim Hakkı

the book's publisher, rejected the attestation of Konyalı due to his not being an expert on literature. After deciding to call another group of experts to evaluate the novel, the court asked İstanbul University to provide five relevant names (*Cumhuriyet*, December 20, 1939). The university suggested three people: Mustafa Şekip Tunç, a professor of psychology; Ali Nihat Tarlan, a Ph.D. in textual analysis; and Sadrettin Celal Antel, a professor of pedagogy.⁵ In their short expert report, which contradicted the previous one, the professors concluded that the novel could not be considered obscene and, therefore, could not be prohibited on that basis.

The two reports did not differ because of the change in experts but because they evaluated the text from completely different contexts. In his report, Konyalı viewed the book as a "historical document," whereby he took the world and lives of the people described in *Afrodite* as historical fact. That is, rather than evaluating the novel as art in its free form, he considered it as a "distortion of reality" presented in the form of art. When the second approach—evaluating the novel as art—is the basis of evaluation, there is no legal reason to prohibit the novel's publication. In the criminal code of the period, Articles 426 and 427 define when something should be considered obscene. Any artistic or scientific material that does not conflict with the two Articles is excluded from prohibition. Such artistic or scientific material could be legally published (Safa, January 15, 1940). Article 31 of the press law provides the same definition (*Cumhuriyet*, December 20, 1939). While Konyalı viewed the novel as a historical document, the second expert group evaluated the book as art.

The prosecutor agreed with Konyalı, claiming that "our case is not a case of literature" (*Cumhuriyet*, December 20, 1939). After the second report was read in court, the prosecutor argued that if this book was an example of literature, it had to be readable by all citizens, including children. To prove his point, he asked the education board (*Talim ve Terbiye Kurulu*) of the Ministry of Education if this novel could be prescribed to students as reading material in literature lessons. The board reported to the court that, although the novel was not obscene, it could not be given as reading material to the students (Korok, 1940: 6). In asking the board about the book's level of obscenity, the prosecutor's aim was to prove that not every piece of art could be deemed innocent regarding obscenity. The board's report enabled him to argue that the book was not just an ordinary piece of literature that should be made freely available to the public. That is, he attempted to broaden the control of literature, and the arts in general, through public law. Thus, this case was an attempt to give power to the courts rather than litterateurs or artists to decide whether to label any public material as obscene (Korok, 1940: 7). As discussed later, this approach was vehemently opposed.

In subsequent trials, the attorney general sued several newspapers and writers over their opposition to the *Afrodite* case, with more than 20 cases opened against newspapers

Konyalı (1896–1984) continued his studies on the subject after the case ended. His urban history studies are especially accepted as important. For a detailed explanation of Konyalı's intervention as the expert on the case and *Cumhuriyet* newspaper's political accusations against him, see Semiz (2015). In another defamation case between Konyalı and *Cumhuriyet*, Konyalı sued the newspaper editors for publishing documents about his political attitudes before the foundation of the Republic. *Cumhuriyet* accused Konyalı of being one of the enemies of the Republic.

5 These three people, all from the Literature Faculty of İstanbul University, were known as right-wing conservative intellectuals of the period. Although none were litterateur, they were significant intellectual figures.

by the end of February 1940 (*Yeni Sabah*, February 28–29, 1940). Except for some extreme-right ones, all the country's newspapers were accused of making interpretations that could influence the outcome of an ongoing case. Despite great pressure on them, the press continued to report news about the *Afrodite* case, even placing it on their front pages. When the book's publisher was acquitted on March 1, 1940, the news became the day's headline, regardless of each newspaper's political leanings. People present in the court applauded the decision, while the prosecutor appealed against it. Speaking after the court's decision, the publisher said, "This is the greatest reward that I have had during my 32 years of life as a publisher. I thank you for this. I wish to donate all of the book's income to the victims of the earthquake in Erzincan" (Korok, 1940: 15).⁶ On April 2, 1940, the court of appeal also accepted the decision, enabling *Afrodite* to be freely published.

This short description of the trial shows little difference from any other obscenity trials in Turkish history or elsewhere. However, strange things happened during the *Afrodite* trials, which had not been witnessed before. Newspapers, intellectuals, and the general reading public became caught up in the court events and allegations. They paid great attention to this particularly riveting case. Crowds of people wished to attend the trials to support the publisher, the translator, or *Afrodite* in general. When the attorney general began suing the newspapers, they continued to enthusiastically report about the case and the crowds, with the writers attempting to interpret the crowd's enthusiasm. It would be appropriate to say that they tried to give meaning and assign significance to the crowds' fascination for the case. In other words, a kind of mass mobilization occurred between the writers-litterateurs and the crowds, who were curious about the outcome of the case, the book, and particularly the obscenity of the book's subject. However, before describing the reactions to the case, it is necessary to deliberate on how writers and ordinary people understood obscenity during the 1939–1940 period.

The Perception of Obscenity

In general, there are various reasons for the general public's desire to gain knowledge of the obscene or private affairs. A general deductive explanation would be their interest in the forbidden or secret affairs. Obscenity in literature can be traced back nearly to the origination of written culture. While also a subject of oral literary traditions, obscenity has long existed in both Eastern and Western classical literature. Historical texts of the East, such as *Kama Sutra*, *The Perfumed Garden*, and *One Thousand and One Nights*, and Western classics, such as *Decameron* and *Canterbury Tales*, are generally accepted as early examples. Initially, all these texts faced defamation, repudiation, contempt, and trials. Yet, such literature also attracted a large number of audience and generated its own readership. However, most of these texts have not been classified since as "obscene literature." In modern times, obscenity or pornography in literature chiefly refers to a kind of low-culture text written to attract plebeian readers.

With the advent of "modernity" in European history, the "novel" as a new individualistic

⁶ In December 1939, a disastrous earthquake struck Erzincan in Eastern Turkey, killing many people. Everyone tried to help the people of the region, with newspapers and all kinds of organizations conducting aid campaigns for the victims. The publisher Semih Lütfi Erciyaş followed the same route, trying to gain the people's sympathy and show that the trial was not held only for gaining material advantage as he was being accused of by some writers.

written genre targeted a new audience, with obscenity/pornography in literature becoming a sub-genre that was labeled “obscene plebeian literature.” Instead of the themes, fictionality, and perceptions of high-brow literature, plebeian literature used language that appealed to the general masses. It also employed basic plots with themes and characters taken from everyday life. Contrary to “classical” works, this literature resorted to themes that increasingly appealed to the masses to consume such books. During the European Enlightenment, this obscene literature—or pornography in its excessive form—was viewed as a new genre that could negatively affect the general public. Even in those times, it was defined in relation to “libertarianism” (Hunt, 1993: 36).

Interestingly, this obscene plebeian literature was employed as a tool for social critiques of the religious and political authorities during the European Enlightenment (Hunt, 1993: 10). Especially in pre-Revolutionary France, this genre became a useful tool in the struggle for the “dethronement” of monarchical power. As popular culture gained a heightened interest in this kind of literature, the obscene “best-sellers” became an instrument for disgracing the rulers, enabling a critique of their effects and power over society. During this period, most best-sellers in France were obscene literature and, because of their effect on society, were subject to intense scrutiny and prohibition (Darnton, 1995).

During Ottoman–Turkish modernization, obscene literature began to appear with the arrival of the novel as a new form of written literature. Although there was already a strong tradition of obscene literature in both classical *Divan* and folk literature, Western obscene literature only appeared with the widespread use of the printing press. Irvin Cemil Schick believes that this development is a consequence of “print capitalism” in the late Ottoman period (2011: 196–216). According to Zafer Toprak, the spread and popularity of obscene plebeian literature in Ottoman society can be viewed as a means of “escape” from the adverse effects of Ottoman military defeats and the commoditization of women due to social crisis and poverty (1987: 25).⁷

Obscene literature was prohibited or subjected to trials for both its “problematic” definition in socially constructed moral codes and its political effects. Two cases preceding the *Afrodite* case exemplify the reception of obscene literature by the Ottoman-Turkish authorities. The first case concerned the novel *Bir Zânbâğın Hikâyesi* (The Story of a Lily, 1910), written by Mehmed Rauf (1875–1931). This case destroyed the author’s literary reputation and led to his eight-month long imprisonment for acts against social morality. Furthermore, he lost his position as captain in the Ottoman military by court-martial (Karakışla, 2001: 15). The second obscenity case concerned a popular science book rather than a literature text. The book is titled *Gebe Kalmamak İçin Ne Yapmalı* (What to Do to Avoid Getting Pregnant) and is published by the monthly magazine *Sevimli Ay* in 1927. This book was accused of encouraging “disorderly moral behavior,” and a general press campaign was also launched against it. Following the trial, the publisher was sentenced to a month’s imprisonment and imposed a heavy fine of 15 Turkish lira (Bardakçı, 1986: 17).

The distinctive feature in these obscenity trials is the deliberations on the characteristics of the literary subjects in dispute, which was also an important factor in the *Afrodite* case.

⁷ Toprak’s article also summarizes the development of obscene plebeian literature during Ottoman-Turkish modernization.

Books classified as obscene plebeian literature, which were viewed as having lesser artistic value, could be prohibited more readily than other texts considered as having scientific or refined literary value. This situation developed as a result of the conflict between the literary perceptions of the era's intellectuals and the state authorities' attempts to define the limits of obscenity. Low-culture literature, such as obscene plebeian literature, could be more readily sacrificed by the period's dominant writer/literature milieu; however, they adopted a more defensive stance when the discussion revolved around a high-culture product. This high-culture/low-culture dichotomy also became the key element in discussions surrounding the *Afrodit* case. The defendants of *Afrodit* asserted that Pierre Louys was a member of the high-culture literary circle, so his work could not be judged by its effect on public morality. Conversely, the authorities supporting the book's prohibition attempted to prove that the book had no artistic or literary value. For İsmail Hakkı Baltacıoğlu, an important conservative philosopher of the period, this general perception of the intellectuals was easily perceived:

If then our problem concerns a work of art, let us think: Which works of art neglect the modesty and pudicity of the people? Here is an all-out answer to you: None!... The work of art is not obscene, whether it mentions morality or immorality. Because a work of art – if it really is a work of art – cannot bear an existence that will neglect public modesty and pudicity. ... So, for the man of law, both the theoretical and practical principle should be this: when investigating whether something is obscene or not, the experts or jury needs to be formed not from men of ethics or men of law but from artists and aesthetes. (January 4, 1940: 14)

Two different views exist regarding the question of obscenity. Although “pure” obscenity was unwelcome to either views, the discussion revolved around whether obscenity was acceptable or not in the arts. Those supporting the prohibition of *Afrodit* argued that obscenity should not be accepted even in the form of art. They discussed the problem around the terms “national morality” and “societal order.” The social utility of the artistic subject played the primary role in this view. Rakım Ziyaoğlu provides a clear example of this perspective:

If the work of art is appropriate for the morality and the traditions of the society, useful to the life of society, it should be printed in millions and permitted to spread; the book should be read everywhere. If the book is not appropriate for the morality of society, harmful to the life of society, and contrary to the politics of the state, it should be prohibited. Earning money from such works and the desire to spoil the morality of society in this way should be blocked. (1940: 14)

While the supporters of this view defined a work of art in terms of its utility, they did not clarify which authorized institution would decide whether a work of art was harmful or not. Instead, they argued that all kinds of obscene material should be prohibited due to the challenge of discerning between what was considered “harmful” and “useful.” They also attempted to broaden the meaning of the term obscenity by speculating about nudity. Ziyaoğlu, for example, considered nudity as follows: “It is not nudity that frightens society. It is not the aesthetic view. Not the statue of *Kirizis*. But the evil that nudity will do by disguising itself in such masks” (Ziyaoğlu, 1940: 12).

The other viewpoint evaluated obscenity according to its form, arguing that obscenity in arts should not be prohibited. Cafer Seno offered the following reasons:

Since there are morality and virtue in life, immorality and lack of virtue exist too. All of them are the realities of life. Art, in avoiding hypocrisy, without exception, has to show us life, by including every side of it. Otherwise, it would not be art. (December 7, 1939)

Similarly, Necip Fazıl Kısakürek, a well-known conservative poet, described the limits of obscenity in Islamic thought as follows:

It is an academic reality throughout the world that a masterpiece of art from an aesthetic perspective is not obscene but brutish work is obscene. Also, from the Islamic viewpoint, within the limits of religion, lustful value is good and widely accepted; brutish nature is bad and rejected. To perceive the difference, which we could never understand and know, between lustfulness and brutishness must not be that hard. Just listen to the marvelous words of the Prophet, who owns the religion: Islam is nothing but bashfulness. The real work of art never offends our feeling of bashfulness! I don't see any difference between considering as obscene and confiscating *Aphrodite* and arresting any beautiful woman that passes along the street as being obscene. (December 19, 1939)

For the followers of this view, the form in which obscenity is presented comes first. After the acquittal of *Afrodite's* publisher, the book was sold to everyone, even by peddlers, regardless of age and profession. The main motivation of those adhering to this perspective was to support the publication of *Afrodite* and prevent the control of literary works by state institutions. However, they did not want the book to be made accessible to every individual. Instead, they tried to impose new limits as they were unsure about the book's utility. Their real intent was to protect the "sphere of literature" from state control. The supporters of this view also agreed with the others regarding the problem of obscenity, as indicated by Va-Nü:

The court has acquitted *Afrodite* due to its being a work of literature. But the book of Pierre Louys is only a gain for Turkish when it is printed in a limited quantity and kept concealed in a library exclusively for intellectuals and litterateurs. Otherwise, when it is printed and presented to children in the streets, the nature of the problem becomes different. (March 10, 1940)

These discussions on obscenity and art also occurred during the foundational years of the Republic. The dichotomy between the cultural heritage of the late Ottoman period and the new cultural base that Republicans wished to create in the new Republic was an important issue that needed to be addressed for the new elites. A survey conducted by Refik Ahmet Sevengil in *Vakit*, a Turkish newspaper, in 1929 enquired about obscenity in art. The interviewees gave similar responses, with 14 out of 18 agreeing that works of art could not be labeled as obscene, although on differing grounds (Arslan, 2016: 67).

The people, however, viewed obscenity differently than the litterateur-writer milieu. Obscene materials have always captured the attention of the public in general. Richard Sennett argues that "intimate vision is induced in proportion as the public domain is abandoned as empty" (2002: 12). During the 1939–1940 period, the public sphere was not free from the control and dominance of the state. In a society characterized by stringent social control, people tend to have a greater desire and curiosity to acquire knowledge of intimate relations. This phenomenon can be witnessed both under oppressive governments, where various forms of participation in the political sphere are constrained, and in depoliticized societies, where politics unfolds in a corrupted public sphere. As discussed in the following section, the Turkish people paid remarkable attention to the

Afrodit case. Thus, in the minds of the people, it was not only the issue of prohibiting an artistic work of literature but also the curiosity to learn about the obscenity hidden in the book. Considering the people's habits as described in the newspapers of the period, their desire to gain access to obscene materials becomes obvious. When Konyalı published *Tarihi Afrodit* (Historical Aphrodite, 1940), people hurried to buy the book from the peddlers, believing that they were indeed buying Pierre Louys' novel. This suggests that the people were not buying the book due to their support for it but due to their eagerness to acquire the obscene information from the book. This desire was clearly expressed in the peddlers' calls while selling Konyalı's book: "Do not go to *yüksek kaldırım* (high street) to buy pictures of women! Give me 50 piasters and buy an *Afrodit*" (Küçük, February 20, 1940).⁸

The Popular Perception and Discussions

The *Afrodit* trials attracted the people's attention more than any previous obscenity case, with as many as 5,000 people attending the trials in the courthouse, according to newspaper reports (*Tan*, February 25, 1940). However, estimates differed from newspaper to newspaper, with some, like *Yeni Sabah*, which supported the prohibition of *Afrodit*, not reporting the behaviors and the number of people in detail. However, the people displayed immense enthusiasm for going to the court and supporting *Afrodit*. The crowd became so intense that the prosecutor wanted to postpone the trial due to the inappropriate atmosphere in the courthouse (Güngör, February 25, 1940). Despite the use of police and even the gendarmerie to control the crowd, it sometimes overcame the barricades and filled the courthouse. When the officers refused to admit the people, they protested outside, singing the national anthem and the Republic's tenth-anniversary march to show their support for the accused.

The whole society became intensely occupied with the case to an unprecedented degree. In a caricature printed in the cartoon magazine *Karikatür*, the case was depicted as more important than the black market, which had been the most important issue in wartime Turkey (Ramiz, January 18, 1940). The people appeared less preoccupied with the war, to the extent that the newspapers gave the case equal space with the Soviet annexation of Finland.

In the media, there were two different perceptions about the *Afrodit* case. The first pertained to the material benefits the case would provide for specific individuals, while the second was intricately linked to mobilizing the people, considering the *Afrodit* case as a "national problem."

The first perception took a humorous view of the case and concentrated mainly on the material benefits that specific individuals would gain due to the *Afrodit* case.⁹ Burhan Belge was a prominent proponent of this view and wrote humorous articles about each

8 *Yüksek Kaldırım* (High Street) was originally a long stairway starting at the intersection of Karaköy and Bankalar Streets and ending in Galata. Due to its proximity to Karaköy harbor, the district also had many brothels visited mostly by sailors.

9 A humorous writer of the period, Naci Sadullah (1907/10–1975), wrote a satirical poem criticizing the publisher's material benefit: *O beauty, o beautiful fairy/In the end of the day, someone is very lucky/When the trial ends, our friend Semih Lütfi/Thanks to us will have thousands of clients*. The poem is translated by Arslan (2016: 79).

day's important events. In his articles about the *Afrodite* case, he humorously claimed that if the publisher is acquitted in the case, then many people would use the name of the book for marketing different goods to increase their sales (January 17, 1940; February 26, 1940). Such perceptions increased after Konyalı published *Tarihi Afrodite*, with advertising posters declaring "The *Afrodite* you waited for is out now!" (*Akşam*, February 26, 1940). Due to public enthusiasm, this book sold in great numbers, although they mistakenly believed they were buying the original *Afrodite* by Pierre Louys.

As the initial expert consulted in the case, Konyalı faced accusations of exploiting the people's interest to benefit himself. The media directed their anger at him as he was instrumental in banning the book. Thus, when he published his own book, the newspaper writers, especially Peyami Safa, accused him of trading in the name of *Afrodite* (*Cumhuriyet*, February 17, 1940; Safa, February 19, 1940). The case became more about the trial of Konyalı than the book's obscenity, with writers like Safa exposing Konyalı's character and previous political practices. Consequently, the material benefit perspective coalesced with the second perspective so that Konyalı's character and political views became part of the "national problem" arising from the *Afrodite* case.

Two days after Konyalı's book was published, *Cumhuriyet*, a Turkish newspaper, published documents about Konyalı, written in his own handwriting that indicated he had not been a supporter of the Anatolian movement during the National Struggle years. On the contrary, he had supported the British forces and swore at Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and the entire Kemalist struggle (February 20, 1940; February 23, 1940).

The second perception arose at the very beginning of the case when Cafer Seno's article criticized the prosecutor and the expert as "reactionary" for prohibiting the book. He claimed that the book had already been published 26 years before in Süleyman Tevfik's translation. Seno's article stated:

How could this happen? A work of art, which has not been found obscene by the dark bigotry twenty-six years ago, could be considered a disgrace and sinful and prohibited on the eve of nineteen forty, and could be taken to court! ... There must be a misunderstanding in this! ... Could the Prosecutor of the Republic of our secular and revolutionary era act with an understanding that is much more backward than the period that was twenty-four years ago? This should not be considered. (December 7, 1939)

From the beginning, the case was considered as part of the "reactionary-progressive" struggle. As the trials progressed, the views and interpretations of most of the writers-litterateurs remained unchanged. İrem Üstünsöz defines this perspective in a similar manner, asserting that "the case per se was evaluated as an attack on the modernization ideals of the Republic" (2015: 223).

During the trials held in the presence of thousands of spectators, the crowds began rallying behind the case as a national problem: a struggle between reactionary and progressive forces. The articles and interpretations of the prominent writers of the time gave meaning and significance to the people's interest in the case. The crowds went to the courthouse as if at war, struggling with the police to get in and trying to hinder the trial by singing the national anthem and tenth-anniversary march when they could not enter. Conversely, writers consistently acknowledged the youth's sensitivity to this national issue and urged them to actively combat dark bigotry (Sertel [Z], February 22, 1940;

Sertel [S], February 25, 1940). Upon the disclosure of Konyalı's documents, it became evident to these groups that this was simply a battle against reactionary threats attempting to impede the progress of revolutionary Turkey. Mekki Said Esen summarized this threat as follows:

Let Konyalı İbrahim continue his affirmation on the obscenity with conviction, the *Afrodit* of *Piyer Luiz* exposed a mentality, that sprouted in mildew. Apparently, to choke the hatred and wrath of national conscience, the appearance of this *Afrodit* against them was predestined in 1940. (29 February 1940)

Nevertheless, while the issue in question was described as a struggle against reactionary forces, another perspective—the reactionary view—labeled it as a national problem. They opposed the publication of the novel and supported its prohibition; however, the supporters of this view did not show themselves in court. According to the supporters of the second perspective, publishing this novel would poison the Turkish nation's national morality. For example, M. Rasim Özgen states, "This tiny novel is produced with the skill of proficiency and art in such a very good way that it poisons the morality like the poison of coal brings death in a lovely languor" (1940: 8). Yet, the two perspectives were not significantly different in terms of their final solution. The difference in their approach was in their evaluation of "literature as a public sphere."

As discussions continued in the newspapers, the nature of the case evolved from being one centered on obscenity to becoming a national problem in the war against reactionary movements. After the trials, few people remained concerned with the original reason for the case.

Two articles by Safa are valuable for accurately understanding the meaning given to this case by the writer-litterateur milieu. The first, *Davacı Biziz* (We Are the Plaintiff), was written at the outset of the case (January 12, 1940). In this article, Safa formulated a kind of "front" against those trying to prohibit the book. He gathered all prominent figures of the period on one side and accused the rest of being the enemy of the regime. As he put it, "We are the main plaintiff, and our trial is the trial of revolution, trial of beauty, trial of culture" (January 12, 1940). Richard Sennett describes another similar case, the Dreyfus Affair, in his book, *The Fall of Public Man*. He interprets the process as follows:

As each stage in this spy-story detection unfolds, a conflict unfolds about what the evidence means. The longer the Affair goes on, however, the less the parties involved are concerned with what the evidence tells about an act of espionage, and the more they are concerned with using the evidence to define two communities in conflict. At a certain moment the line is crossed where the spy-story loses any interest other than as fuel for the community via confrontation. (2002: 240)

This view can be adapted to this case. Thus, Safa engages in a practice akin to what Emile Zola did when he wrote his well-known article *J'Accuse* (I Accuse). Safa formulates a community against an opposition, which he himself has formulated. The trial of a piece of literature material was turned into another issue, which was not a piece of literature and which was not accused of being obscene. The people, who were initially not motivated to protect the regime, went to the court to protect the regime from omnipotent and omnipresent enemies. Thus, conflicting communities were constructed through the process of mass mobilization in the name of a national crisis. By the end of the trials,

the debates no longer focused on whether the novel was obscene or not as its alleged obscenity had transformed into mere fuel for constructing communities via confrontation.

Safa's second article, *Her Dava Millidir* (Every Trial Is National), written after the book's publisher was acquitted, explained how the writer-litterateur milieu needed such a construction. He discussed popular support during the *Afrodite* case and asserted that every trial must be open to the public as this would increase the societal awareness of the people. Regarding the importance of individual rights, he argued:

From now on, except for some people who grin inanely and pretend to be intellectual and a group of immature spirits who are unaware of what is going on in the world, all of us know that to act unjustly even to a single member of Turkish community would not be directed against only that man; it would be against all the nation and, above that, against the concept of justice. Protection of this concept is national; above that, human protection, protection that is essential to be solid against the aggression... (March 3, 1940)

Here, Safa clearly discusses the new language formed during the *Afrodite* case. He highlights the priority of individual rights as a collective right. Hence, the protection of individual rights should be regarded as an integral aspect of a collective struggle. In doing so, he addressed and enlightened the community formed during the *Afrodite* case, which was initially only interested in the book's obscenity. Subsequent discussions in the case drew the community's attention to the rhetoric of progressive-reactionary conflict. Here, Sennett's emphasis on the creation of a new language in the Dreyfus Affair should be recalled. Sennett says that "Zola offered them ... a language of belonging to a collective struggle, rather than a set of logical reasons why Dreyfus should be free" (2002: 249). Alike Zola, Safa attempted to establish a new community language related to the *Afrodite* case, aiming to foster a new community united by an integrative identity for collective struggle.

Concluding Remarks

In the first half of the twentieth century, both in Turkey and around the world, the primary focus was on addressing the unresolved issues of the previous century. The two World Wars, the resulting economic crises, and the rise of fascism, as well as the formation of new nation-states and national identities, played a crucial role in shaping the twentieth century. It is important to recognize that literature and mass arts did not exist outside of this establishment process, instead playing a fundamental role in shaping the social fabric of the time. In Turkey, intense discussions surrounding the institutionalization and establishment of a new national identity marked the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Such discussions took place at all levels of society. The modernization process in Turkey was inextricably linked to the emergence of a new state and political order, with debates on literature playing a crucial role in shaping this formative process. Literature and literary writers became the torchbearers of the new national and state identity, disseminating and institutionalizing it in social terms. From the outset of the modernization process, writers were able to successfully establish an autonomous domain for themselves, which was closely tied to the adoption of a foundational ideological mission. The significance of this autonomy cannot be overstated, as it was often perceived as an essential component in acquiring hegemonic social ideals. Any political intervention against this autonomy was considered as deviating from modernization and new ideals.

The *Afrodit* case, and the ensuing debate over it, was a clear example of how the issue of literature was not just about obscenity or sexuality. Rather, the central issue at hand was the extent of intervention that the state and the established order could exert in the field of literature. This issue has been a recurrent theme in the literary history of Turkey, where writers and artists have often struggled for autonomy. This struggle has at times been directed more toward challenging political intervention rather than determining content, whether in portraying village realities or defining the subject matter of paintings and sculptures. In those years, the prevailing belief among the intellectuals was that literature and the arts play a vital role in shaping the social fabric of any society, and it is the responsibility of the state and established order to respect and protect the autonomy of these domains.

Thus, intellectuals and artists of those days ardently criticized any interference in literature as a public sphere of intellectual resistance. During Republican Turkey's single-party period, literature was the most important tool for resisting state policies. As Ahmet Oktay notes, the intellectuals of this period were constrained by the regime's strict ideological control:

The regime was avoiding as much from violent oppression to survive. In this way, it was trying to unify the newborn intelligentsia under a specific state ideology. Similarly, this situation, due to the intellectuals' lack of open political opportunity, paved the way for the intellectuals' inclination to the sphere of culture. (1986: 338, 348)

During the single-party period, literature was employed by the intellectuals as one of the important domains to develop their resistance to the system. Therefore, they vehemently criticized any interference in it. In the *Afrodit* case, they perceived a similar threat to their sphere and felt compelled to resist. They took advantage of the people's interest in obscene materials to formulate an arena of struggle within the framework of progressive-reactionary rhetoric. In the early years of the Republic when the people needed to be mobilized, this rhetoric was used intensely. During those years, all kinds of groups were kept alive to the threat of the "enemies of the revolution" (*inkılap düşmanları*), which was occasionally authenticated by civil uprisings. During the 1939–1940 period, the *Afrodit* case served this purpose.

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