

Queer Portrayals in Turkish Cinema: Case Study of The Club and Selim Songür

Türk Sinemasında Queer Temsiller: Kulüp Dizisi ve Selim Songür Üzerine Bir Analiz

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Highlights:

- The study examines queer representations in Turkish cinema, TV, and digital media.
- It conceptualizes emerging stereotypes through the notion of the nonosh.
- It analyzes Selim Soygür's queer portrayal in The Club via the nonosh concept.

Abstract: The historical drama series, The Club (2021–22), narrating the story of a night-club at the center of Istanbul nightlife during the 1950s, achieved great success by becoming the eighth most-watched non-English-language series on an international digital streaming platform. The significant public affirmation rose on the representation of the leading character – the nightclub star, influenced by respected queer performer Zeki Müren (1931–96). Müren has been credited as the greatest performer in Turkey and a modern male icon with his artistic excellence in singing and his outstanding stage performances for over 40 years. While Müren was performing his art on stage wearing a miniskirt, platform heels, and bright earrings, he had a celebrity persona that would be called the Pasha ("army general"). His homosexuality was known as a "hidden reality" (Arslan 2011:278-279). The referential association of the fictional character with Zeki Müren interpreted in the article to further discuss the portrayal of the queer performance in the series. For this purpose, the article introduced the conceptualization of *nonosh*, a polite yet explicit contempt, presenting an embraceable form of queer identity in Turkish society to define the common portraiture of queer in Turkish popular films and TV shows.

Keywords: Turkish Cinema, Queer Performance, Nonosh, Zeki Müren, The Club (2021-22).

Öne Çıkanlar:

- Türk sineması, televizyon ve dijital platformlarda queer temsilleri incelemektedir.
- Bu inceleme, ortaya çıkan stereotipleri *nonoş* kavramı ile kavramsallaştırmaktadır.
- Kulüp'teki Selim Soygür üzerinden queer temsili *nonoş* kavramıyla analiz etmektedir.

Öz: 1950'li yıllarda İstanbul gece hayatının merkezinde yer alan bir gece kulübünün hikayesini anlatan tarihi drama dizisi "Kulüp" (2021) ilk sezonu ile Netflix'te en çok izlenen sekizinci İngilizce olmayan dizi olarak büyük başarı elde etmiştir. Dizinin başarısında queer karakter Selim Songür'ün temsilinin önemli bir

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etkisi vardı. Selim Songür karakterinin şarkı söylemedeki sanatsal mükemmelliği ve kırk yılı aşkın süre sergilediği olağanüstü sahne performanslarıyla Türkiye'nin en büyük sanatçısı ve tartışmalı bir queer ikon olarak anılan Zeki Müren'le taşıdığı benzerlikler dikkat çekicidir. Müren sahneye siyah smokinlerle ya da ışıltılı aksesuarlara sahip takım elbiselerle, hatta mini etekler ve platform ayakkabılarla çıkmış, kendi kostümlerinin yanı sıra müzisyenlerinin kostümlerini, gösterilerinin dekorunu ve dansçıların koreografisini tasarlamıştır. Muğlak bir biçimde kapalı kalmış cinsel kimliğinin ötesinde, o öncelikle dinleyicilerine karşı nezaketi, hayır işleri, sanatsal duruşu ile Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'nin örnek bir vatandaşı olarak pozisyonlanmıştır. Çalışmada Kulüp dizisinin baş kahramanı Selim Songür üzerinden ortaya koyduğu queer temsil, popüler Türk Sineması ve televizyon anlatılarındaki queer temsilleri geleneği içinde karşılaştırmalı olarak tartışılır. Bu amaçla makale, kibar bir kabul edilebilirliğe işaret ederken açık bir aşığılama barındıran *nonoş* kavramını kullanarak *Kulüp* dizisinde farklılaşan queer temsili tartışmaya açmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Türk Sineması, Queer Performans, Nonoş, Zeki Müren, Kulüp (2021-22).

Genişletilmiş Özet

Bu çalışma, 1950'ler İstanbul'unu konu alan *Kulüp* (2021–2022) dizisinde yer alan Selim Songür karakteri üzerinden Türk sinemasında queer temsillerin nasıl inşa edildiğini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. *Kulüp*, Türkiye'nin sosyal ve kültürel hafızasında önemli bir yer işgal eden çok katmanlı bir dönemi yeniden kurgularken, aynı zamanda Türkiye'de ana akım dijital platformlarda yer bulan nadir queer temsillerden biri olarak öne çıkmaktadır. Dizinin merkezine yerleştirilen Selim Songür karakteri, yalnızca bir sahne sanatçısı değil, aynı zamanda queer kimliğin temsiline dair yeni sorular doğuran, tarihsel bağlamla iç içe geçmiş çok yönlü bir figürdür. Bu bağlamda, queer kimliğin kültürel kodlar, temsil biçimleri ve tarihsel atmosferle nasıl etkileşime girdiği sorgulanmaktadır.

Araştırma, niteliksel bir metodolojiye dayanmaktadır. Temsil kuramı, queer kuram ve performativite anlayışı (Butler, 1990) doğrultusunda yapılandırılan çalışma, Selim karakterinin söylemsel, görsel ve performatif düzeylerdeki inşasını çok katmanlı biçimde analiz etmektedir. Çözümleme, dizi metninin ötesine geçerek görsel semboller, kostüm tasarımı, mekân kullanımı, müzikal performanslar ve karakterin beden dili gibi öğeler üzerinden gerçekleştirilmiştir. Özellikle sahne performanslarının koreografik yapısı, sahnedeki jest ve mimiklerin anlam üretimiyle ilişkisi, queer estetiğin biçimsel dışavurumları olarak ele alınmıştır.

Analiz sonucunda Selim karakterinin, Zeki Müren'e doğrudan göndermeler içeren görsel ve performatif kimliğiyle hem nostaljik bir estetik sunduğu hem de queer kimliğin temsiline dair alternatif bir alan yarattığı ortaya konmuştur. Bu temsil, sadece cinsel yönelimi görünür kılmakla kalmamakta, aynı zamanda karakterin sınıfsal, etnik ve toplumsal aidiyetleriyle birleşerek queer

kimliğin çoklu kesişimsellikler üzerinden nasıl inşa edildiğini göstermektedir. Selim'in bireysel çatışmaları ile kolektif dışlanmışlık deneyimi, patriyarkal normlara karşı sessiz ama dirençli bir karşı duruş biçimi olarak yorumlanabilir.

Sonuç olarak, *Kulüp* dizisinde yer alan Selim Songür karakteri, Türkiye'de ana akım görsel kültürde nadiren karşılaşılan bir queer temsiliyet örneği sunmakta ve bu yönüyle hem queer izleyicilere hem de genel izleyiciye normatif olmayan kimliklerin anlamlandırılabilceği bir anlatı evreni kurmaktadır. Bu çalışma, queer kimliğin yalnızca görünürlikle sınırlı kalmayan, tarihsel bağlamda yeniden kurgulanan ve kültürel bellekle etkileşim içinde olan bir temsil pratiği olarak nasıl işlediğini açığa çıkarmayı amaçlamaktadır. Selim Songür karakteri aracılığıyla, queer temsillerin Türkiye'deki dönüşen medya ortamında nasıl bir anlatı potansiyeline sahip olduğu tartışmaya açılmaktadır.

Introduction

The historical drama series, *The Club* (2021–22), narrating the story of a nightclub at the center of Istanbul nightlife during the 1950s, achieved great success by becoming the eighth most-watched non-English-language series on an international digital streaming platform. The significant public affirmation that the series gained was due to the representation of its leading character, the nightclub star. He directly refers to the respected queer singer Zeki Müren (1931–96). Müren has been credited as the greatest performer in Turkey and a modern male icon, renowned for his artistic excellence in singing and outstanding stage performances over the past 40 years. As stated by Gür, Zeki Müren was not only a celebrated singer but also played a key role in shaping the stage aesthetics of his performances. He designed his own costumes as well as those worn by his orchestra, and even arranged the stage layout himself, drawing on his background in fashion design. On stage, he often appeared in daring outfits—such as miniskirts, platform shoes, and flamboyant jewelry—that challenged conventional norms. Yet, despite this gender-bending style, the wider society, marked by its homophobic attitudes, framed his celebrity persona through titles like “the Sun of Art” or “the Pasha,” which simultaneously celebrated and contained his queerness (Gür, 1996, p.37). His homosexuality was not openly expressed in society and was known as a “hidden reality” (Arslan, 2011, pp. 278-279). The referential association of the fictional character with Zeki Müren will be interpreted in the article to discuss further the portrayal of the queer performance in the series. For this purpose, the article will introduce the conceptualization of *nonosh*, a polite yet explicit contempt, and present an embraceable form of queer identity in Turkish society to define the common portraiture of queer in Turkish popular films and TV shows.

Portrayal of Queer in *The Club* (2021–22)

The historical drama TV series *The Club* (2021–22) narrates the story of a night-club at the centre of Istanbul nightlife of Turkey. Matilda, an ex-con, works in one of the most important nightclubs of 1955. Trying to establish a good relationship with her daughter Raşel (Asude Kalebek), Matilda tries to fight the egos of her boss Orhan (Metin Akdülger), nightclub manager Çelebi (Fırat Tanış) and headline singer Selim (Salih Bademci).

The series, which sheds light on the recent history of Turkey, became the eight most-watched TV series. In the week of 8–14 November 2021, 7,860,000 hours were watched in total (Cumhuriyet, 2021a). The public admiration is grounded on various aspects of the narrative, through the representation of the ethnic and religious minorities in Turkey during the furious dynamics of nationalism in politics. The events revolving around headliner Selim Songür, the aesthetic contribution of Songür's costumes and show to the visuality of the series, and the presence of a “plausibly deniable” tension with the club's owner Orhan were among the remarkable elements of the series. In this context, the significant public affirmation that the series gained stems from its portrayal of the queer character, Selim Songür. Selim Songür is reminiscent of Zeki Müren, Turkey's first queer star, who changed the musical concept and stage shows of the 1950s and became a legendary name that everyone admired and respected. With this familiarity, Selim became the most popular character in the series. In addition to the fact that a queer character has such an important place in the story in the mainstream narratives in Turkey, it is also important that Selim is portrayed realistically, sincerely and respectfully, in line with historical references. Zeki Müren's status as a prominent figure in Turkish society from the 1950s to the late 1990s made Selim Songür one of the most influential characters in a mainstream narrative. Although Zeki Müren's stage shows with his flamboyant and gender-fluid costumes indicated a queer performance, neither he nor the Turkish people made a clear comment about his sexual orientation during Müren's lifetime (Stokes, 2012, pp. 108–09). The public image of Zeki Müren as a secular, well-educated modern artist reveals the structure of his identity as an appropriated entity by the standards of republican ideals.

The ‘out yet in the closet’ queer performance of Zeki Müren, alongside his public identity as an ideal citizen in the Turkish Republic, deserves attention in order to identify the public affirmation of Selim's character. The terminology of “out yet in the closet”, employed here to signify the queer performance of Zeki Müren, is derived from Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualization in *Epistemology in the Closet* (1990).

Society's respect and admiration for Zeki Müren, based on the public approval of Selim Songür's queer performance in *The Club*, creates a solid ground to step on and discuss the extents of queer performance and its representation in Turkish popular culture in a historical context. In an effort to reflect the engagement of Selim Songür with Zeki Müren, as well as to interpret the representation of queerness in Turkish popular culture –particularly in mainstream cinema and TV shows– we will begin by sketching the character, Selim Songür. Next, we will portray Zeki Müren and the story of his artistic development, exploring the effort to articulate his queer performance. This emerged in a paradoxical relationship with his public persona and the ideal citizen identity he had built up in accordance with republican ideals. The affinity between the character Selim Songür and Zeki Müren –a great salutation, if not a direct reference– will be discussed in the following section. In order to reflect on our assessment of the significance of the queer performance of Selim Songür's character in *The Club*, we will discuss the representation of queerness in popular Turkish cinema within a historical context. This article introduces the concept of *nonosh*, a socially acceptable form of queerness in Turkish culture to highlight the diverse representation of queerness in popular Turkish cinema and TV shows, and to define the common portrayal of queer characters in Turkish popular films and TV shows.

Selim Songür enters the doors of the club right in the middle of chaos, as the main star of the show –the classical Turkish music singer– leaves due to budget conflicts and brings the club to the brink of closure. The charming young man steps into the main hall in light yet rhythmic moves, making his approach appear like a dance routine in a romantic play. Selim's tall, well-built figure with pleasing proportions is emphasized with an elegant style, while his curly hair and nerdy glasses create a sweet deviation from standard handsomeness. He catches Orhan's, the owner of the club, attention at once with his sparkling wit, while criticizing the musical performance during the rehearsal. The perfection of his Turkish in terms of both pronunciation and flourishing use of vocabulary reveals him as a well-educated intellectual artist. In his self introduction to Orhan, Selim projects his vision for the show that would carry the club to the top of Istanbul nightlife in the 1960s. Selim promises Orhan a show that would bring east and west together, a show that in western standards matches the taste of the eastern crowd 'just like İstanbul, just like Turkey'. Selim with great passion says, 'I have a dream, just like East and West fighting but making love at the same time'. Orhan looks at Selim with great admiration, and smiles. The two men's eyes meet. Selim notes with a curl of his lips, a sparkle in his eyes, Orhan endorsing his vision, sharing his enthusiasm with a matching sparkle in his eyes, and Orhan employs him with a firm handshake. This intimacy, which starts between the two men in the first episode, develops at speed in the later episodes. When Selim disappears on his first night at the gazino due to stage fright, Orhan

desperately starts looking for him in the streets of the city. He finally finds Selim hiding in his house and confesses that he shares the same dreams with him. Selim says to Orhan, ‘I will disappoint you’. Orhan approaches Selim and says, ‘then disappoint me with your blood, sweat and tears on that stage’. Their gazes meet again, and the scene ends. Despite the obvious physical attraction and admiration between Selim and Orhan, the series never explicitly shows or implies acts of intercourse between them or put what is going on between them into words. What they have for each other remains in the closet in the first season of the series. The conceptualization of queer performance theorized in Judith Butler’s work brings us to the fertile ground of interpreting actions, gestures and statements in the context of gender positioning in various texts, including film and TV productions. The perspective of Butler indicates the fact that ‘gender category’ and social gender codes imposed on individuals by social order are attempted to be maintained in the heterosexual order. The ‘body’ is not just an anatomical structure, it is a symbolic structure that has meaning in time. A person’s body makes their innate sexuality visible. However, the concept of gender cannot be limited to solely the human body.

According to Butler, gender and sex do not originate from anywhere. Identities and bodies gain gender through the repeated performances of certain cultural norms (Butler, 1999). Following Butler’s lead on the conceptualization of performance as way to define the act that represents gender, we will utilize the notion of queer performance to compare the character Selim Songür and Zeki Müren.

From our perspective, the queer performance of Selim Songür exposes a charming gay character who stands bold and proud; he is the talented, admired and respected queer headline of a fancy nightclub in Istanbul. The queer performance presented by Selim Songür in *The Club* exhibits a novelty in popular mainstream films and TV shows in Turkey with the portrayal of a queer identity that extends the stereotype of a soft, effeminate insignificant character.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research methodology to examine the construction of queer representation in Turkish screen narratives, with a specific focus on the character of Selim Songür in the Netflix series *The Club* (2021–2022). The analysis is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws from representation theory, queer theory, and Judith Butler’s (1990) concept of performativity. These approaches provide the conceptual tools necessary to interrogate the discursive, visual, and performative construction of queer identity within the context of a mainstream Turkish period drama.

Rather than limiting the investigation to the narrative content or textual analysis of the series alone, the study adopts a multimodal perspective that encompasses various semiotic layers of the audiovisual material. The methodology involves a close reading of the series episodes in which Selim Songür appears, paying special attention to the symbolic use of costume design, spatial arrangements, musical performances, and bodily gestures. Each of these elements is understood not merely as stylistic choices, but as components of a broader representational strategy that constructs and communicates queer identity within the socio-historical context of 1950s Istanbul.

Particular emphasis is placed on Selim's stage performances, which function as a concentrated site for the articulation of queer aesthetics. The choreographic structure of these performances, along with the expressive use of gestures, facial expressions, and interaction with the audience, are examined as performative acts that subvert heteronormative frameworks. This performative analysis allows for an exploration of how the character enacts gender and queerness not solely through speech or identification, but through embodied practice and visual codes. The stage becomes a space where alternative modes of subjectivity and gender expression are temporarily legitimized and celebrated.

In addition, the methodology incorporates visual discourse analysis to deconstruct the character's presentation in relation to cultural memory, nostalgia, and intertextual references—particularly those evoking Turkish icon Zeki Müren. The character's visual likeness, vocal performance, and stylization are treated as layered citations that simultaneously situate Selim within a recognizable queer lineage and produce new meanings within contemporary Turkish visual culture.

This methodological approach aims to uncover how *The Club* includes a queer character and constructs queerness as an affective, political, and aesthetic register within its narrative world, by synthesizing textual, visual and performative elements. This holistic reading seeks to bridge the gap between queer visibility and the politics of representation by situating the analysis within a broader cultural and historical discourse.

Pasha of Modern Turkey: Zeki Müren

The character of Selim Songür points to a well-known figure in Turkish society and culture. The memorable melodies of his songs, his stage costumes and shows, his audiences' admiration, and his 'open secret' queer identity all recall the legend of Zeki Müren (1931–96). From his first radio emission in 1951 until his death in 1996, Turkey's most important pop icon, Müren, was a beloved queer singer, a pioneer in utilizing mass communication tools, and an inspiration to queer

individuals in Turkey. Turkish art music is derived from Ottoman court music, which has rich musical influences including Arabic, Persian, Greek and Sephardic traditional music. Müren introduced queerness to Turkish audiences with his flashy, unique style of dress, hair and make-up. One could even go as far as saying that Müren queered Turkish masculinity: he performed it convincingly, while also exposing its contradictions' (Hawkins, 2018, p.110). Although Zeki Müren had been putting forth queer performances his stage shows, costumes and make-up for 45 years; however, he had never openly mentioned his queer identity. No public opinion was expressed about Müren's sexual orientation until his death. As Martin Stokes quotes Elif Şafak, the 'fear of effeminate men' in society prevented Zeki Müren's admirers from speaking the truth about him (Şafak cited in Stokes 2012, p. 70). This situation may have been interpreted as glorified male friendship in Turkish Sufism, a sign of sincerity in a period of scepticism or a love devoted to one's country and society in a world detached from family and fertility. In short, Müren was wanted and interpreted by society as a 'model citizen' in any case (Stokes, 2012, p. 71).

Queer culture finds its place in dispersed areas of public life such as music and dance in Turkey. In Ottoman poetry, which encompasses the majority of Turkish art music lyrics, the author's voice is completely masculine. However, the gender of the poet's lover can be ambiguous. This ambiguity stems both from the fact that Turkish is a gender-neutral language, and the belief that intellectual friendship can only exist between men in such a male-dominated culture (Schick, 2020, pp. 192–193). Zeki Müren created an alternative form of Turkish masculinity by navigating Turkish cultural symbols in Turkish popular culture. 'In a culture with rigid norms of masculine dress, his costumes and his performances reproduce gender norms in an ambiguous but widely celebrated way that the very notion of masculinity comes to seem less oppressive in its demand for conformity' (Hawkins 2018). In 'Stars', Richard Dyer argues that 'ideology is the set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world and the society in which they live' (Dyer and McDonald 1998: 2–3). Zeki Müren's public persona reconciles East and West, conservatives and secularists, old and new, Ottoman Empire and Turkish Republic. Müren won the public heart by matching republican cultural reform laws and Ottoman heritage, which was 'stigmatized in musical style, religious expression and gender expression' (Hawkins, 2018, p. 102). Turkish stage culture is a reflection of the change in Turkish social structure that Zeki Müren experienced from 1951 to 1980. The official ideology of Turkish Republic was to break away from the Ottoman Empire and to realize itself as a secular democracy modelled on European civilizations. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder and the first president of the Turkish Republic, manifested his ideology by creating a constitutional democracy and introducing cultural reforms, such as the acceptance of the Latin alphabet, the imposition of a Western dress code, and THE

promotion of Western art over Ottoman heritage. Since 1923, the year of the foundation of the Turkish Republic, all these reforms have caused major fractures in Turkish society. In the 1950s, Zeki Müren's voice, singing style, clothes, speech and stance were a liberal reaction to the authoritarian attitude of the Republic (Stokes, 2012, p. 104). The state's elitist vision of a top-down modernity project and its adopted lifestyle was the norm during the Republican People's Party's (CHP) one-party rule from 1923 until the Democrat Party (DP) took over the government in 1950. Democrat Party (DP) then diverted the cultural policy of CHP and replaced it with populist discourse. In addition, with the mechanization of agriculture in Turkey, the migration from the countryside to the city grew, the number of slums increased and the population of major cities such as Istanbul started to change. However, when the Democrat Party seized power, Turkey became a member of NATO. The rapprochement with America caused changes both in the official Republican ideology and in the cultural sphere. This rapid change in society is reflected in the field of music. Turkish art music became popular again. Its popularity changed depending on where it was heard (Çak, 2013, p. 79). Television broadcasting did not start in Turkey until 1968, so radio broadcasting and the record industry were the most important sources for spreading music throughout the country. Therefore, gazinos gained importance as places where the public could see their favourite singers' live performances. The gazino, a kind of nightclub where you can eat and watch live entertainment, has been the most important indicator of this popularity. Gazino derived from the word "casino", which means the country house, can be simply defined as a nightclub that serves food and alcohol and presents music and dance. Gazino is a hybrid space reflecting the dynamism of the city that combines Turkish and Western elements. The first gazinos were opened during the last period of the Ottoman Empire, specifically in the Pera district, where embassies and non-Muslims resided. Until the 1950s, the number of gazinos in Istanbul was limited. Gazinos, which increased in number with the Democrat Party coming to power, are both social media and new addresses of new entertainment culture (Öztan, Korucu, 2017, 73). The story told in *The Club* series was also based on the reflection of this change in daily and cultural life in Turkey. When Zeki Müren became the leading figure in Turkish art music and the first major pop star to genuinely captivate and mobilize the public in the 1950s (Boyacioglu, 2016, p. 9). His target audience encompassed practically everyone because he had already been a famous pop star before he began changing gazino culture. Ever since his debut, his gender and sexuality have been the subject of debate, as many listeners dwelled on his gender status after his first radio concert in 1951. He issued his first record in the same year, at a time when the recording industry functioned as a market-oriented enterprise shaped by public demand. His commercial output captured the ambivalent desires of audiences, which oscillated between tradition and Westernization.

Reflecting these cultural tensions and the ideological ambitions of the new Turkish Republic, he was positioned as the representative voice of the national institution (Stokes, 2012, pp. 72–75). Parallel to the simplification of the Turkish language through Republican reforms, song lyrics were likewise streamlined. Müren's repertoire encompassed both modern and classical styles, integrating Balkan and Western elements into Turkish music. He further contributed by reinterpreting folk songs and contemporary Neapolitan popular tunes in Turkish (Boyacioglu, 2016, p. 25). By reimagining Ottoman palace music through the lens of popular performance, Zeki Müren converted Turkish art music into a popular genre, commodifying it as a cultural product readily consumed by mass audiences (Bengi, 2014, p. 15). As Istanbul's gazinos entertainment became famous in the 1950s, the number of people coming to Istanbul from the countryside increased. A new audience emerged in the gazinos. Their costumes and behavior showed that they were not from Istanbul. Thus, the new audience of the gazinos could watch Zeki Müren perform live on the stage; previously they had only heard him on the radio and on records (Öztaş, 2017, pp. 86–87). Throughout his artistic life, he expanded his fan base from the urban bourgeois of big cities such as Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir, where people watched him in the gazinos, to the rural people who watched Müren's films (Hawkins, 2018, p. 99).

Müren took increasing risks with his clothing and costume design over the course of his career. When Stokes mentions 'Müren's pompous yet unspoken queerness' (Stokes, 2012, p. 70), he refers to the attractive, flamboyant look of Zeki Müren's clothes that clearly challenged the gender codes in Turkish society between the 1950s and 1990s. On 22 May 1955, he performed on stage for the first time in Istanbul. He was aware that innovations needed to be introduced on the stage and planned these innovations (Çak, 2013, p. 90). Willing to draw upon his education in pattern design from the Academy of Fine Arts for his stage appearance, Müren paid attention to every detail in his stage setting and costumes, and designed colorful clothes. He started his first gazino programme with a white tuxedo, which was acclaimed in the newspapers, and he then continued with a black one. He closed his concert in a bright burgundy tuxedo. From that point, he started adding little details to his clothes, such as a pearl pin and cufflinks. In 1958, he took to the stage for the first time in a colourful jacket embroidered from head to toe with sequins. His repertoire and his costumes affected the mood of the audience. He took off his glasses, his face was clean-shaven, and with make-up, he had plucked eyebrows and false eyelashes with mascara and lipstick. He had a feminine short haircut with blond streaks. In 1958, the Turkish press portrayed him as 'the young voice who brought the aesthetic sensibility of the French revue to the Turkish stage,' underscoring his role in blending Western stylistic elements with local performance traditions (Bengi, 2014, p. 86). The immense popularity of Müren's concerts led him

to reconfigure the dynamics of stage and spectatorship in order to assert full control over the performance space. By constructing a T-shaped stage and employing arc lighting that followed his movements, he effectively dissolved the boundary between performer and audience. This staging strategy created an intimate illusion in which each spectator experienced the performance as though it had been directed solely at them. (Gür, 1996, p. 49). The Turkish people's eternal love for Zeki Müren kept him away from all society's prejudices. Spencer Hawkins argues that the most prominent representation of Turkish identity has been Atatürk's clean-shaven, European male appearance and his stylish, westernized attire. Through his elegant and westernized attire, Atatürk diminished the cultural suspicion that an attentively dressed man might be dismissed as effeminate or a dandy. This style of clothing, Hawkins suggests, later created the conditions of legitimacy for Zeki Müren's own elaborate attention to costume and self-presentation, reframing what might otherwise have been read as excessive or deviant into a culturally acceptable expression of modern Turkish masculinity (2018, p.102).

Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic and formerly an Ottoman general (pasha), became the model figure of modern Turkish leadership. In a striking parallel, Zeki Müren was also popularly referred to as a pasha by his admirers and the media. At a ball held at the Turkish Military Academy in 1955, students performed a waltz to his song called 'Beklenen Şarkı –The Expected Song'. After this, he started to be called pasha. Celebrated for his vocal artistry, theatrical presence, and cultivated use of the Turkish language, Müren embodied a model of cultural refinement that resonated with the secularist and reformist ethos of Kemalism. This positioning enabled him to be constructed as both an exemplary 'true' citizen and a member of the national elite. His legacy as an idealized citizen was reinforced even posthumously, as his will stipulated that half of his wealth be donated to the Mehmetçik Foundation, an institution symbolically tied to the military and the protection of the nation (Çak, 2013, pp. 80–195). With this act, he also strengthened his role of pasha, which in Turkish means a respected person.

Stokes argues that Zeki Müren's public persona, which he built in the early years of his career, combined multiple and contradictory identities into one star identity. Zeki Müren's performances such as his stage presence, vocal style, and clothing were deeply rooted in traditions of Turkish and Ottoman nightlife. As Stokes observes, during the 1920s and 1930s male singers in Turkey were often celebrated for performing in a so-called 'female voice,' employing high-pitched tenor registers that carried associations of refinement and artistry (2010, p. 105). Zeki Müren's queerness, in many ways, evoked earlier performance traditions of the Ottoman era. This form of nostalgic queerness unsettled the Republican construction of national masculinity, yet it simultaneously garnered immense admiration from audiences. The evocation of the past was

particularly resonant with the legacy of the *köçek* (male dancers dressed in drag) who had embodied the entertainment culture of the Ottoman court. Reviving these associations, Müren's performances in the nightlife of the 1950s reintroduced this Ottoman-inspired aesthetic into the cultural imagination (Çak, 2013, pp. 54–55). Müren brought together kitsch and elite culture, effeminate and emotional intimacy, eye-catching performances and auditory privacy, an East-centred cosmopolitanism, that is, Ottoman heritage, and a West-centred Turkish nationalism, namely the republican reforms. Müren's voice occupied a central place within the complex processes of cultural identification. Its softness, consistency, cultivated tone, and disciplined refinement conveyed associations with the qualities of citizenship—rationality, moderation, and thoughtfulness. Nevertheless, in the tradition of Turkish art music, vocal interpretation has always been the decisive criterion of artistry. Müren destabilized the canonical mode of interpretation by advancing a more emotional and improvisatory style, marked by abrupt tonal shifts and an openness to spontaneity. In this sense, his androgynous voice and innovative vocal delivery constituted the first popularized challenge to Republican cultural reforms within the domain of music. (Stokes, 2010, pp. 84–99).

According to Hawkins, the Ottoman nostalgic fantasy is one of universal welfare and cosmopolitan inclusiveness, but Müren also plays on Kemalism's Westward orientation to allow space for his flamboyant showmanship. As in his gazino performances, Müren's film persona straddled the wishes and fantasies of the two rival strands of modern Turkish culture – all the while queering both models of masculinity (Hawkins ? 2018, p. 111). Müren allowed the question of identity to be publicly constructed in a responsible and citizenly way, asserts Stokes (2018). Yet, Zeki Müren continues to be revered as a national hero in Turkey. He was bestowed with the title of 'State Artist' in recognition of his lifelong musical achievements and was affectionately known as 'Pasha.' His legendary voice, together with his enduring contributions to Turkish art music and popular culture, remains unrivaled. (Boyacioglu, 2016, p. 25). Zeki Müren's queerness unsettled the parameters of Turkishness as defined by official ideology, sparking debates that exceeded the normative boundaries of national identity. Stokes contends that the very circulation of public discourse around queer identities can be read as 'a displacement of the more politically difficult topic of discussion'—the unresolved ethnic and class fissures structuring the modern Turkish state (Stokes, 2012, p. 70).

Zeki Müren's career exemplifies the paradox of a closeted queer star who simultaneously came to embody the republican ideal of the respectable *pasha*. From his earliest stage appearances in the 1950s, Müren pushed boundaries through elaborate costumes, flamboyant self-presentation, and an androgynous voice that challenged normative gender codes. His attention to stagecraft in

designing sequined jackets, colorful tuxedos, and theatrical lighting brought spectacle and intimacy together, while gestures and vocal inflections hinted at queerness without explicit declaration. Yet Müren's identity was anchored in the cultural legitimacy endowed with Kemalism. His refined use of the Turkish language, his donations to the Mehmetçik Vakfı, and his elevation to *State Artist* aligned him with the values of national service and elite citizenship, reinforcing his public image as a model Kemalist citizen even as his queerness unsettled the very ideals he appeared to embody. While his queerness recalled Ottoman traditions such as the *köçek* and reintroduced them into modern entertainment, his public image as a patriotic and cultured *pasha* neutralized potential cultural marginalization. Therefore, Müren persona **stood at the intersection of conflicting cultural codes**, simultaneously subverting and legitimizing them. While queering Turkish modernity, Müren **persisted as** an uncontested national hero. In *The Club* series, gender-based criticism is brought to these conflicts for the first time in the mainstream area.

In *The Club*, Selim Songür is represented as a passionate and ambitious composer with innovative ideas about what a gazino show and new Turkish music should be. In the first episode of the series, he is portrayed as a young and inexperienced musician who was rejected by every gazino he applied to. The musicians he works with tell him to give up. He rejects this because he firmly believes that he will achieve his dreams. Following this scene, the audience begins to see how Selim can achieve his dreams, about which he speaks with great passion. David Bordwell, in his chapter 'The art cinema as a mode of film practice', argues that in classical cinema narrative form motivates cinematic representation. 'Narrative time and space are constructed to represent the cause-effect chain. Specifically, cause-effect logic and narrative parallelism generate a narrative that projects its action through psychologically defined, goal-oriented characters' (Boardwell [1979] 2008, p. 152). The character arc built for Selim, his struggle to achieve his passion to express his music to a wide range of audiences, as well as staying true to his identity, constitute the key points of the plot line. Selim's tale as the protagonist of the series moves the story forward through his resilience and devotion in the face of tumbles and falls. He distinguishes himself from the other characters with his clothes and behaviours from the first episode when he meets the audience. He has a different look than the other male characters with his plastic imperial retro-framed eyeglasses, black bow tie, double-breasted, plaid, grey blazer, grey flannel trousers, burgundy cardigan and black moccasins. With his long, wavy, pompadour haircut and black fedora hat, he completely reflects men's fashion of the 1950s. This 'colourfulness' does not appear in the costumes of any other male character throughout the series. Çelebi and Orhan, the other important male protagonists of the series, always wear dark suits and light-coloured shirts. The driver, İsmet, is seen throughout the series in a white turtleneck sweater, a black leather coat, and dark trousers.

Thus, Selim is visually distinguished from other characters with his fashionable clothes and refined taste. He enters the room of Orhan Şahin, the boss of the gazino, and offers to build the future of the nightlife together: ‘I promise you to pull the carpet under the feet of this city.’ Selim goes onstage and sings his first song, ‘I am my own tale’. The sympathy, belief in each other, solidarity, and love, which began between these two young men from the first time they met, are shown only in their eyes and metaphorically in Selim’s lyrics throughout the series. In the lyrics of the song, Selim says, ‘[s]ome of us are guilty of the rainbow, some of us are born forbidden, defying the world, in the end.’ The series never names him ‘gay’; instead, queerness is articulated obliquely, through the villain Çelebi’s insinuations directed at him and his companion Matilda. This censored text is inscribed in the very constitution of Selim Songür’s persona, a figure that unmistakably echoes Zeki Müren’s carefully crafted image. As one commentator notes, such ‘figures allow fears of femininity, loss of masculinity, or childhood fixation to be projected onto dominant characters,’ while at the same time, the secrecy surrounding them relegates homosexuality to the sphere of a private libidinal economy, foreclosing its public articulation (Arslan 2011).

Zeki Müren moved into the film industry in 1954 and starred in eighteen films. “The open secret of his homosexuality adds to the pathos that the viewer feels when watching the tribulations of Müren’s characters” (Hawkins, 2018, p. 108); he always played boyishly innocent, graceful leading male characters, almost all named ‘Zeki’, who are involved in heterosexual romantic relationships with strong women but come to be controlled by them. There was always a rivalry between two powerful female characters, and he could not decide between these attractive females. Arslan refers to Zeki Müren’s ‘caught in the middle’ characters as ‘Zeki is figuratively married to the public in the film’ (2011b, p. 209).

As Gür stated, Zeki Müren managed not to be the subject of homophobic violence with the power of his famous persona in a society where homophobia exists intensively (Arslan 2011b, p. 278–279). Selim Songür meets Matilda, one of the series’ main protagonists, while they are both smoking outside the gazino. Outside the gazino, the two smokers and ‘outsiders’ find each other. He notices Matilda’s worn-out but stylish clothes and luxury brand old shoes. Matilda’s sad and melancholic posture intrigues Selim, who himself is a melancholic loner. Selim wanted to pursue his dreams and was rejected by his family because of his choice to be an artist. Throughout the series, we do not hear any words about his queerness and his interest in Orhan. When he is sad, he goes home alone. He does not want to accept a life imposed on him, that is why he is melancholy and lonely. He is as sad and melancholy as Matilda, who has been released from prison and has lost her family and her place in society. This melancholic couple, who do not accept the identities determined for them in society, find each other outside the gazino where they have just started

working. They are no longer alone. He starts to sing and dance to American singer Harry Belafonte's (1927–) famous calypso song 'Matilda' to cheer her up. Their friendship begins when he convinces Matilda to dance with him. The definition of 'how to be gay', quoted by Spencer Hawkins from David Halperin, presents Selim Songür's queer situation, which is 'never expressed but shown' throughout the two seasons of the show. The attitudes that Hawkins reveals when describing Zeki Müren's characters in his movies – his shy and sarcastic smile, throwing his hair back in an exaggerated way – appear as details hinting at Selim Songür's homosexuality in the series. Thanks to the close bond he has formed with Matilda, he feels comfortable enough for the first time. He overcomes his shyness, and he starts 'flirting' with her. Admiring and being admired by a strong female character older than him, flirting with her and being in solidarity with her, these situations are similar to those of the characters portrayed by Zeki Müren in his films. In the historical movie *Katip* (Scribe 1968), the mother of the Ottoman sultan admires the voice of the young man played by Zeki Müren. The sultan-mother's extreme interest has a great influence on Müren's character, and the young man is not unhappy with this situation (Hawkins, 2018, p. 110). Zeki Müren's movies and performances were especially popular among women (Hawkins, 2018, p. 106). Müren's notoriety as a ladies' man continues in Selim's character. Selim appoints Matilda as the only person to help him behind the scenes. Thus, he protects Matilda from Çelebi's mistreatment and finds himself a confidante. Together with Matilda and her expectant daughter, Rachel, they 'start a family'. Selim's innovations onstage are similar to those of Zeki Müren. On his first night at the gazino, he takes to the T-shaped, illuminated stage in a white tuxedo, just like Zeki Müren. He no longer wears glasses. Gold beads are embroidered on the collar of his jacket. At the end of his first show, he rises and flies up the hall thanks to a mechanism that leaves the audience in amazement and admiration. A burgundy velvet or a pink satin jacket with a black satin collar, black trousers, black bow tie and white shirt, which he wears in his later shows, is also reminiscent of the colourful tuxedo jackets that Zeki Müren introduced to Turkish nightlife. Although Zeki Müren did not abandon his masculinity on stage, he incorporated feminine elements in his movements. In doing so, he alienated Turkish masculinity and thus queered it. He openly exhibited his queer performance on stage as he received great love from society with his voice. This was an important innovation that Müren brought to the gazino scenes. Sociologist Mehmet Ümit Necef explains the Turkish people's admiration for these queer artists with their admiration for the performance skills of these artists and the tolerance they show towards them for behaving a little weird when performing art compared to other people (Hawkins, 2016, p. 103).

In *The Club*, Selim Songür is one of the main characters who drive the story forward. He is assertive, determined, and brave enough to do what he knows is right. He is proud of the

innovations he brings to the entertainment world. He is also satisfied with his clothes and appearance. This is the reason why he got into a big fight with Orhan, and the audience felt that they had a romantic relationship in the first episode of the second season. Orhan asks him to wear a black suit on the evening when he will receive the ‘Most Successful Turkish Businessman Award’. However, Selim has the most decorated jacket he has ever worn. In season two, the costume is never revealed in its entirety; rather, the audience is permitted only a glimpse of the jacket’s ruffled lace collar, white with gold. This selective framing resonates intertextually with a 1972 music video by Zeki Müren, where the artist’s own costume prominently features a similar white ruffled collar, signaling continuity between queer performance traditions across different media and historical moments (Nysarac, 2013).

Selim Songür’s songs are not only a musical element in the series. These melodies, which are immediately popular with the audience in Turkey, complete the story as diegetic music. With this cohesive and unifying role in the series, Songür attracted so much attention from the fans of the series that the second season of *The Club* was introduced with the news that for ‘Those who miss Selim Songür, the longing is over’. Just as Zeki Müren has become legendary as one of the most important artists in the history of modern Turkey, Selim Songür appears as the most loved, eagerly awaited and watched character in *The Club* TV series.

Representations of Queer Performance in Turkish Cinema and TV Series

Queer representations in Turkish cinema are directly related to the development of cinema in this geography. The series of modernist implementations practised in arts and culture during the Early Republican period ignored the field of cinema, despite its suitability for use as a political instrument. Through the lack of state support and administration, cinema in the Turkish Republic developed in interdependency on the audience and private entrepreneurship, hence reflecting the culture of the masses (Arslan, 2010, pp. 7–10). Cinema in Turkey started as almost a pure form of entertainment that was thoroughly reflective of the audience’s demands, in other words, showing society’s fears and fantasies during the given period. In this respect, even though cinema in Turkey was established within the rules and regulations of the entertainment industry, seemingly free from the enforcement of the state policies connected to the Kemalist reforms mentioned earlier, it still reflects the ideals of the foundation process through their impact on society. Yeşilçam Cinema is broadly defined as the filmmaking practices between the 1940s to 1980s in Turkey, which flourished and had a reflexive relationship with modernist implementations of the foundation process. Within the framing of ideal citizenship depicted by the reformist movement, the representations of gender that are involved in love, sexuality and family in Yeşilçam Cinema are

strictly maintained within the norms of heterosexuality. Yeşilçam Cinema almost completely avoided the representation of a queer performance in its narratives until the 1980s (Erdem, 2019, pp. 3–4). Queer performances through the 1980s and beyond are commonly referred to as ‘New Cinema in Turkey.’ In the context of 1990s criticism that it would be interpreted as challenging the reformist implementations of the early Republican period. Criticism of the Early Republican period in Turkey took place between 1919 and 1938 gained significance through the 1990s. Understanding the critical dynamics of society around the 1990s that question the Kemalist ideals of the foundation process demands attention for its impact on the emergence of queer performances in cinema. The social characteristics of 1990s Turkey are marked by cultural expressions that exhibit emancipation from the modernist duties of Republican ideology (Gürbilek, 1992, pp. 14–102). These are reflected in the desires of various social groups that had been ignored in order to meet the ideals of imagined modernity. Through this, Gürbilek identifies the social experience of 1990s Turkey as the ‘return of the repressed’ in society. The social experience of the period was echoed through a critical perspective in academia to discuss the modernist implementations of the Early Republican Period.

Queer theory and politics began to develop in Turkey within the critical dynamics of a 1990s Turkey that aimed to spotlight and deal with the consequences of the modernization project. Critical queer perspective grew upon the broad resistance in society challenging the implementations of the foundation process and its reductive tendency towards multi-cultural, multiethnic and multi-religious society to reach the imagined ideals of the republic. Institutions such as Kaos Gl and Lambda Istanbul for LGBTI+ rights reinforced the penetration of queer critical perspective in the cultural sphere during the period (Partog, 2012, pp. 169–78). The involvement of the critical queer perspective in the cultural sphere along with feminist criticism created a considerable impact on artistic products, especially in cinema in Turkey. Queer characters came to be represented in films as the central figures that drove the story. Among these films, *Dönersen Islık Çal* (Whistle If You Come Back) (Oğuz 1992) narrates the story of a tense survival relationship between a transvestite and a dwarf, both are excluded from society. *Gece Melek ve Bizim Çocuklar* (The Night, Angel and Our Gang) (A. Yılmaz 1994) portrays the dark, corrupt, bitter portrayal of İstanbul nightlife through the eyes of a group of ‘nocturnal animals’, male and female prostitutes, pimps and transvestites. The atmospheric and poetic film *Hamam* (Hamman) (Özpetek 1997) tells the story of an intense and affectionate love relationship between two men whose paths cross over the reconstruction project of a historical Turkish hammam in Istanbul. The queer characters in these films gain prominence over their full-bodied portraiture with character arcs and inner conflicts; they are powerful elements in the storyline, actively driving

the subplots. These films, which emerged during the 1990s in Turkey, effectively participated in the critical queer debate by the way they portrayed queer performances. Another significant example of indie cinema that bears the critical queer perspective in its narrative and formal qualities is *Zenne* (2011) directed by Caner Alper and Mehmet Binay. As a significantly diverse example that emerges from the cinematic conventions of Turkish Cinema in 2000's, *Zenne* is inspired from the true story of Ahmet Yıldız, a young man who is murdered by his family for being gay in 2008. The representation of queer performance in *Zenne* gains prominence in its use of dance as an expression of queer identity by bending gender norms. Such visual depiction of queer performance in *Zenne* is fortified by its expression of the pressures of social structures and depiction of violence the character faces in everyday life. The queer characters in *Zenne* are not mere representations but as figures through which performative resistance, identity formation, and the contestation of social norms are staged.

However, these films were the cultural products of an era of film production in Turkey that was on the brink of extinction. The period of the late 1980s and especially the first half of the 1990s is broadly considered a dead season of cinema, the dry moment between the gradual disappearance of Yeşilçam Cinema and the appearance of the New Cinema in Turkey. Therefore, films conveying a critical queer perspective in their narratives through powerful queer characters would be considered examples of an indie practice far from the usual narratives of mainstream popular cinema in terms of audience expectation and their ultimate reach and wide circulation. The relationship between popular mainstream films and the dynamics of society of a given period deserves attention in order to signify their interaction (Hayır, 2014, p. 811).

Queer characters were represented in different ways in different periods of cinema in Turkey. As Doğan cites in his thesis, a few Turkish films of the 1980s mention homosexuality as a 'disease' that can be cured. The representation of the effeminate characters are conceptualized via the introduction of the terminology of "nonosh". The conceptualisation of nonosh is accommodated in the article to describe the stereotypical portrayal of queer performance in contemporary Turkish film and television. In Turkish, nonoş is a colloquial term commonly used to identify queer men, with an emphasis on perceived "softness or effeminacy". On the surface, its usage can carry a degree of sympathy or familiarity, yet it simultaneously reinforces the position of queer identity as "other" within society. As such, the term reflects a paradox: it designates a socially tolerated form of queerness that is embraced in popular culture, while at the same time embedding a subtle sense of ridicule or contempt. In this regard, nonosh functions as a stereotype through which popular culture mirrors broader social attitudes toward queer identity. Its

persistence in contemporary film and television underscores both the limited forms of recognition available to queer subjects and the continuing tension between mainstream representation and the critical queer perspectives that have gained ground since the 1990s, especially those challenging the boundaries of Turkey's modernization project. The conceptualization of *nonosh* is significant in that it highlights the duality between queer subjectivity and the appropriated, socially tolerated forms it takes within heteronormative society.

As Zengin asserts, the generativity of embodied experience continually exceeds the regimes of objectification that seek to render it legible, surveillable, and governable including self-objectifying accounts by both trans and non-trans individuals. Bodily practices, in this sense, can transgress and dismantle the reductive structures and disciplinary arrangements through which institutions and everyday life attempt to contain them (2024, p. 150). Zengin's insight into these institutional attempts to confine queer identity within controllable frames provides a ground upon which to articulate the conceptualization of *nonosh* that refers to a socially tolerated yet restrictive mode of representing queer performance in popular culture.

The conceptualization of *nonosh* identifies a stereotypical representation of queer in popular culture that is appropriated within the heteronormative structures of society. In this way, the conceptualization of *nonosh* reduces the queer performance to a certain stereotypical representation of queer in media products. As Çakırlar and Delice point out in *Cinsellik Muamması: Türkiye'de Queer Kültür ve Muhalefet*, queer identity in Turkey cannot be reduced to such softened stereotypes, for it is always entangled with broader forms of social marginalization tied to gender, family, freedom, the state, culture, and reproduction. To be queer, therefore, entails a continuous struggle that goes beyond demands for tolerance or equality, requiring instead a radical critique of the very institutions through which heteronormativity is reproduced (2012, p.17). The conceptualization of *nonosh* is significant in that it brings the emphasis on the diversity between queer subjectivity and the appropriated, socially tolerated forms it takes within heteronormative society. As a queer representation that is reduced to a form rendered acceptable and tolerable within the heteronormative structures of popular culture, the *nonosh* representation of queer restricts the resistive force and transformative power of queer performance, as emphasized in the expression of Çakırlar and Delice (ibid).

In *Cinsellik Muamması: Türkiye'de Queer Kültür ve Muhalefet*, edited by Cüneyt Çakırlar and Serkan Delice (2012), Fatih Özgüven, in his chapter "*Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Edebiyatımızda 'Eşcinsel Dikkatler': Elden Ele Dorian'lar, Hassas Delikanlılar, Pars Kızlar*", argues that the analysis on the gaze towards the male body and male beauty in Turkish literature

offers a rich terrain for critical queer analysis (Özgüven, 2012, pp. 354–376). In this chapter, Özgüven examines representations in Turkish literature that are constructed particularly around the male body, beauty, and homosexual attention, while also drawing on Western literary examples (such as Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*). By focusing on especially Nahit Sırrı Örik’s *Tersine Giden Yol*, Özgüven engages them in a comparative reading. The novel is organized around an “attention to beauty” and demonstrates that such a perspective is nourished by a queer sensibility. The story of Cezmi creates a queer representation in which beauty and fragility are intertwined, portraying a male figure who “needs to be loved, looked at, and admired like a woman.” Yet this representation also portrays the queer as a fragile, constrained, and socially punished performance. Özgüven’s analysis and interpretation of queer representation in literature resonates with the conceptualization of *nonosh* as a stereotypical mode of representation in popular culture, in which queer subjectivity is reduced to socially tolerated yet restrictive forms.

Queer representations, which became more visible in New Cinema in Turkey in the 1990s, are defined as minority and marginal. In the 2000s, the term ‘disease’ disappeared as a result of the increased visibility of LGBT movement in political and social spheres. However, queer characters and others who are defined as minority and marginal still maintain their validity, especially in art-house cinema. The *nonosh* is still visible in mainstream movie and TV series narratives. In the next paragraph, the transformation of the *nonosh* character to the pasha role in *The Club* TV series is discussed (Doğan, 2016, pp. 132–51).

Commercial films that relate to the wider popular culture gain distinction in their effort to catch the pulse of society, with the aim of reaching a large audience. In order to market a film to an audience on a huge scale, films need to accord with the current tendencies in society. Thompson and Bordwell explain the industrial mode of production and the role of broad social tendencies in their metaphoric designation of the contract between the filmmaker and audience. ‘Because of the contract between the filmmaker and audience, the promise of something new based on something familiar may also respond quickly to broad social trends’ (2008, p. 326). In Kellner’s words: ‘Since films must attract large audiences, they need to resonate with the audiences’ dreams, fears, and social’ (2003, p. 207). In order to be sold to a mass audience, commercial film needs to catch the pulse of society and fulfil the audience’s demands. By detecting the prominent dynamics in popular culture, commercial film creatively voices the fears and fantasies of the audience in its narration. The stylish design aims to attract the attention of the audience by portraying and resolving socially conflicting fields – in other words, where the shoe pinches in society. As Arslan points out, with Yeşilçam movies, ‘people saw themselves in those films. Unlike the foreign, unfamiliar stories

and morals of the American films and reliance on characters like television artists, bankers, and gangsters, domestic films reflected people's own lifestyles, issues, and music' (2011, p. 79).

Focusing on the considerable underground positioning of the films in general due to the conditions of the period, queer films of the early 1990s in Turkey had difficulty in achieving a wide circulation of their discourses and affecting social tendencies. Popular mainstream filmmaking practices in New Cinema in Turkey emerged in the late 1990s with the increasing releases of blockbusters inviting the audience to jam-pack the film theatres (Dorsay, 2004:1, p. 14). Queer performances in popular mainstream films since then, however, have exposed a distinct divergence from the earlier examples. Queer performances in popular mainstream productions of the New Cinema in Turkey squeezed the queer identity into a box, reducing them to single-dimensional, shallow identities. Homosexual relationships were portrayed as close friendships of marginalized characters or short-term illusions due to childhood traumas (Özgüç, 2000, pp. 329–331). In the new period of Turkish cinema, the visibility of gay characters increased. However, these representations are unrealized, limited and self-censored. *Istanbul Kanatlarımın Altında* (Istanbul Beneath My Wings) (Altıoklar 1996) is set in seventeenth-century İstanbul during the rule of Sultan Murat IV (1612–1640). The film portrays Sultan Murat IV's relationship with his male lover Musa. The intimacy between them is an insignificant side story, only used to signify the Sultan's incompetency to rule. While the narrative swiftly tags the queer characters as vulnerable and irrational beings, it reduces the Sultan's lover Musa to a beautiful, charming yet dysfunctional doll, and their love affair is expressed platonically (Altıoklar, 1996, p. 332). In *Ağır Roman* (Heavy Novel) (Altıoklar 1997), the representation of queer performance is suggested by Orhan, the protagonist Salih's kind-hearted yet odd best friend. In his quiet, withdrawn nature that embraces social exclusion, Orhan contributes Salih's character depiction as a giving, audacious hero standing next to the freak of the neighbourhood at any cost. *Kabadayı* ('The bandit') (Vargı, 2017) narrates the story of an old-school hoodlum's struggle to save his son's life from the drug mafia in contemporary Istanbul. Sürmeli is the queer character in *Kabadayı*, a dear friend of the protagonist Ali Osman. The deep and strong friendship between Sürmeli and Ali Osman is portrayed respectfully in the narrative and signifies the strong personality of Sürmeli, who sacrifices his life to protect Ali Osman and his son. However, the portrayal of Sürmeli in *Kabadayı* in the context of the representation of the queer performance is limited to an exaggerated drama queen wearing bright chiffon shirts and cabaret-style make-up during the daytime. Positioned as the overwhelmingly devoted and anxious aunt of Ali Osman's son, he keeps grumbling with a deep yet melodious voice; one hand is softly placed on his chest, while the other accentuates his words as it moves through the wrist with a bent elbow. The character Sürmeli is placed in the

narrative of the film to lighten the dark mood of the crime thriller. The queer performance in *Kabadayı* presents a warm, relatable yet ridiculed character through Surmeli. Another popular mainstream film, *Yahşi Batı* ('Beautiful West') (Sorak, 2009), which includes a representation of queer performance, is set in the early twentieth century, and tells the story of two Ottoman secret agents' adventurous travel to the wild west. The character's name is Buck Berry from *Brokeback* in an open reference to *Brokeback Mountain* (Lee, 2005) initially described as a bloodthirsty criminal of the wild west with a prize announced for his head. When he is summoned to hunt down the protagonist Aziz, Buck Berry exposes a dramatic sexual attention towards him after seeing him in his traditional Ottoman wrestling suit – naked on top with leather shorts covered in olive oil. Although Aziz is disturbed by Buck Berry's attention at first, he quickly decides to make use of Buck Berry's interest as a weak spot, to get rid of him by mischievously flirting with him. The queer performance in *Yahşi Batı* by the character Buck Berry portrays an overwhelmingly superficial personality, one purely defined by a desire for the male body. The case of character 216 in blockbuster sci-fi comedy film series *G.O.R.A.* (Baltacı and Yılmaz, 2004), *A.R.O.G.* (Sorak, 2008) and *Arif V 216* (Baruönü, 2018) is rather interesting in terms of the representation of queer performance. In *G.O.R.A.* and *A.R.O.G.*, character 216 shows up as a queer humanoid, the best friend of the heroine, who practices belly dancing with her, reads her fortune from Turkish coffee and gives her relationship advice. While the humanoid is portrayed as an asexual being not involved in any kind of intimacy, the portraiture of 216 bears the qualities of stereotypical queer in exaggerated gestures and embraced clumsiness. In the last film of the series, the storyline is built around the love story between humanoid 216 and a female character. Here 216 suddenly transforms into a heterosexual being without any explanation. The hard shift in the gender positioning of 216 in the sci-fi comedy series points out the doomed positioning of the queer character to the periphery of the main arc of the plot. The unwritten rule in popular culture in Turkey is so distinct that 216 had to transform into a heterosexual character to allow him to be repositioned to the center of the story. The representation of the queer character in *Arif V 216* emerges through Zeki Müren. Here the character appears as himself, portraited in an exaggeratedly coquettish way. The romantic comedy TV series *Kiralık Aşk* (Love for Rent) (2015–2017) is significant for its representation of queer performance due to the high rating scores it receives on national television. The series narrates tales that are full of love, lust and misunderstandings between the rich and handsome guy and the poor and beautiful girl, surrounded by their families and friends. The character Koriş (the 'softened' version of the actual name Koray) is positioned as the confidant of Neriman – the male protagonist's aunt who strives to separate the young lovers. Koray stands out as a ridiculous queer character through exaggerated gestures and expressions,

wearing bright polka dots and overwhelmingly colourful scarfs and pants. While the character's intervention in the incidents would not create any impact on the course of events, his figure is utilized in an amusing manner to echo the strategies of the malevolent aunt.

Discussion and Findings: Nonosh for the Stereotype Queer in Popular Culture

Queer performance in popular film and TV productions in Turkey, especially in the last two decades, portrays a series of stereotypes with overlapping characteristics. Listing the overlapping characteristics would be useful in order to contextualize the common portraiture of queer in popular productions and eventually stress the novelty of queer representation as performed in *The Club* (2022). In queer representations practised in the last two decades in film and TV, no queer character is positioned as a protagonist, not even one of the leading characters. The queer characters in films and TV series of the New Cinema in Turkey are doomed to be side characters. What is more, the queer characters represented in filmic narratives do not have an impact or participate in the progress of the plot. The popular filmic narratives do not represent queer characters in mutual love relationships. The queer characters in those films and TV series are portrayed as chronic singles who are mostly asexual, far from the possibility of coupling. They are not represented as a possible subject of someone's desire, or admiration. They are far from charming, neither intellectually nor physically, and are usually portrayed as ridiculous freaks in delicate fabrics with bright colours. The self-expressions of the queer characters are reduced to templates consisting of cheap sarcasm and exaggeration. They are shown in popular films and TV shows as superficial characters, with no attempt made to create a reliable character. They are bound to float above incidents as single-dimensional facades without a well- designed character arc.

The introduction of the idea of nonosh is utilized to designate the stereotypical representation of queer performance in popular film and TV series in contemporary Turkey. The word nonosh in the Turkish language is generally used to label queer identity with a powerful emphasis on the 'softness'. The use of nonosh suggests sympathy and acknowledgement while boldly positioning queer identity as the 'other' in society. While referring to the socially embraceable form of queer identity in Turkish culture, the identification accommodates a polite yet explicit contempt. Regarding the inherent relationship between contemporary social tendencies and the output of popular culture, nonosh serves as a stereotype of queer performance, reflecting the perception of queer identity in Turkish society. The domination of nonosh in the representations of queer performance in popular film and TV series signifies the limited acknowledgement in society, despite the rise of the critical queer perspective along with the 1990s criticism that challenges the modernization project. *The Club*'s portraiture of Selim extends the

boundaries of nonosh by portraying a charming, vibrant character who is fully part of the narrative progress, positioned right in the centre of the plot. As one of the main characters, he takes the story forward, and is assertive, determined and brave in his decisions. He is a real character, rather than a superficial facade, with a well-developed character arc that reveals his weaknesses and the challenges he faces as he strives to rise above them. In the context of the representation of queer performance, Selim's character maintains a perpetual existence; he is visible and out there whether onstage or in daily life. He is portrayed as an attractive and admirable man, evidenced by the affectionate passion between Selim and Orhan. The queer performance in the series of the nightclub headline act Selim Songür constitutes a new way of presenting queer portraiture outside the boundaries of nonosh.

Conclusion

The positive public reception of the series was revealed in audience numbers as well as various complementary reviews published following the release of the show. Without a doubt, the overall mastery of the execution of the filmic narrative from screenplay to production design in the series is significant for its great popularity. The creators of the series made a bold move, having at its centre the hot potatoes of social dynamics in Turkey. With this move, they maintained a sincere bond between the audience and characters that have been long kept peripheral in popular cultural products. In the context of the reciprocity between the products of popular culture and social tendencies, the representation of a queer performance outside the broad limits of the nonosh stereotype in the popular series points out a certain evolution in Turkish society, with its acknowledgement of queer. *The Club* is a mainstream popular series regarding budget, its cast full of stars, its huge advertising campaign filling all digital plus walk-in outdoor media, and high streaming numbers. Nevertheless, the ground-breaking queer performance, extending the stereotypical portraiture of nonosh, points to a transformation in social tendencies. This transformation signifies the impact of the critical queer perspective that emerged within the dynamics of 1990s Turkey and eventually shaped the social tendencies. However, the public affirmation and admiration would stem from the character's connection with Zeki Müren. The iconic queer star Zeki Müren was embraced, admired and respected by almost all layers of Turkish society. The close reference to Zeki Müren in the narrative of rising queer star in 1960s Turkey anchors society's acknowledgement and identification with the character as an actual popular culture icon. Society's respect and admiration for Zeki Müren certainly operates on public approval of the representation of the queer performance in the series. However, the open yet closed queer performance of Zeki Müren, along with his public identity, which is shaped in accordance with the standards of the ideal citizen as designated by the modernization process, deserves

attention in its public affirmation of Selim's character. The public image of Zeki Müren as a secular, well-educated modern artist reveals him to be an appropriated entity by the standards of Republican ideals. The use of the 'ideal citizen' characteristics of Selim Songür, with its loud salutation to Zeki Müren, enables one to question the representation of queer performance in the series. It is significant that Zeki Müren's open secret homosexuality or 'unopened' queerness is part of the series's character. Outside of the verbal and visual hints at the burgeoning relationship between Selim and Orhan, this love does not pass to a physical level throughout the series. Selim's flirtation with Matilda, his adoption of Raşel's illegitimate child, and his material and moral support to these two women as a father, all are behaviours that maintain the patriarchal order established in society. Like Zeki Müren, Selim 'sacrificed' his true identity and therefore his freedom in order to become a beloved and respected citizen in society. This respect and love gave both Zeki Müren and Selim the chance to be free and themselves only onstage. The queer performance in the series undoubtedly extends the borders of nonosh by building up a queer character outside the stereotypical portraiture of popular culture products in Turkey so far. However, the comparison to Zeki Müren when representing queer identity in an 'out yet in the closet' manner weakens the impact of the critical queer perspective in transcending the borders of nonosh in popular culture.

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