

[Sayı/Issue: 28, Aralık/December 2025]

A CYPRIOT IN OTTOMAN THEATER: NEFİ'S FELAKET AND TANZİMAT  
CENTER-PERIPHERY DYNAMICS

(Osmanlı Tiyatrosunda Bir Kıbrıslı: Nefî'nin Felâket'i ve Tanzimat'ta Merkez-Çevre Dinamikleri)

Araştırma Makalesi / Research Article

Geliş Tarihi / Date Received: 18 Ağustos 2025

Kabul Tarihi / Date Accepted: 12 Ekim 2025

Yayın Tarihi / Date Published: 31 Aralık 2025

DOI Numarası / DOI Number: 10.51592/kulliyat.1768141

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Makale Bilgisi

**Değerlendirme:** Bu çalışma çift taraflı kör hakemlik sistemi uygulanarak değerlendirilmiştir.

**Etik Beyan:** Çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde etik ilkelere uyulmuştur.

**Etik Kurul Belgesi:** Makale için "Etik Kurul Belgesi" gerekmemektedir.

**Benzerlik Taraması:** "Benzerlik Raporu" Turnitin.com / iThenticate / İntihal.Net sistemi üzerinden alınarak tarama yapılmıştır.

**Telif Hakkı:** Çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde yazar/yazarlar tarafından "Telif Hakkı Formu" imzalanarak sunulmuştur. Yazar/yazarlar dergide yayımlanan çalışmalarının telif hakkına sahiptirler.

Atıf Bilgisi:

Yıkık, A. (2025). A Cypriot in Ottoman Theater: Nefî's *Felaket* and Tanzimat Center-Periphery Dynamics. *Külliyyat Osmanlı Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 28(Aralık): 167-186.  
<https://doi.org/10.51592/kulliyat.1768141>

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## Absract

In the 1860s, the first written Turkish theater plays in the Western style began to appear in Istanbul, the center of Ottoman-Turkish literature. These new literary works also attracted interest among Cypriot Muslim audiences. Newspapers and books published in Istanbul were brought to the island, and as a result, Turkish-speaking Muslims in Cyprus became acquainted with the new literary genre. Additionally, the fact that some Cypriot writers resided in Istanbul during the Tanzimat period, and that some renowned authors from Istanbul lived in Cyprus, strengthened the ties between the periphery and the center. Consequently, young men with a keen interest in literature had the opportunity to establish direct contact with elite authors of the metropolis. Among them, special attention should be paid to Hasan Nefi (1854–1917), who wrote the first play of modern Turkish Cypriot literature. His play, *Felaket* [*Catastrophe*], was reviewed by Namık Kemal (1840–1888), one of the leading figures of Tanzimat literature, who had been exiled in Famagusta. *Felaket* was printed in 1875 at Ahmet Midhat Efendi's printing house in Istanbul. The scope of this paper is to discuss the role of center–periphery relations in literary production on the island, through Nefi's play *Felaket*.

**Key Words:** Tanzimat literature, Ottoman-Turkish theater, center–periphery relations, Turkish Cypriot literature, *Felaket*

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## Özet

1860'lı yıllarda, Osmanlı-Türk edebiyatının merkezi konumundaki İstanbul'da Batı tarzında kaleme alınan ilk Türk tiyatro eserleri ortaya çıkmaya başlamıştır. Başlangıçta gazete gibi süreli yayınlarda tefrika edilen bu eserler, zamanla kitap formatında bütün hâlinde yayımlanmıştır. Bu yeni edebî tür, Kıbrıslı Müslüman okur ve izleyiciler arasında da ilgi uyandırmıştır. O dönemde Kıbrıs'ta henüz bir matbaa bulunmadığından, adalı Müslümanlar bu eserleri İstanbul'da yayımlanan gazete ve kitapların posta yoluyla adaya ulaştırılması sayesinde takip edebilmişlerdir. Böylece Kıbrıs'ın Türkçe konuşan Müslüman toplumu, bu yeni edebî türle tanışma imkânı bulmuştur.

İstanbul'dan gelen süreli yayınların edebiyat sayfaları, Kıbrıslı edebiyatseverlerin Batı tarzı yeni edebiyata yönelmelerinde etkili olmuştur. Buna ek olarak, Tanzimat Dönemi'nde bazı Kıbrıslı yazarların çeşitli sebeplerle İstanbul'da ikamet etmeleri ve İstanbul'dan bazı tanınmış yazarların birtakım nedenlerden ötürü Kıbrıs'a gönderilerek burada yaşamaları, merkez ile çevre arasındaki edebî bağları güçlendirmiştir. Bu sayede edebiyata ilgi duyan gençler, metropolün seçkin yazarlarıyla doğrudan temas kurma fırsatı elde etmişlerdir. Bu etkileşim, adalı genç edebiyat heveslileri ile İstanbul'un tanınmış bazı şair ve yazarları arasında usta-çırak ilişkilerinin gelişmesine zemin hazırlamıştır.

Bu bağlamda, modern Kıbrıs Türk edebiyatının ilk tiyatro eserini kaleme alan Hasan Nefi'ye (1854–1917) özel bir dikkat gösterilmelidir. Nefi'nin *Felâket* adlı oyunu, Tanzimat edebiyatının önde gelen isimlerinden biri olan ve Gazimağusa'ya sürgün edilen Namık Kemal (1840–1888) tarafından gözden geçirilmiştir. *Felâket*, 1875 yılında İstanbul'da Ahmet Midhat Efendi'nin matbaasında basılmıştır. Bu makalenin amacı, Hasan Nefi'nin *Felâket* adlı oyunu üzerinden adadaki edebî üretimde merkez-çevre ilişkilerinin rolünü tartışmaktır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Tanzimat edebiyatı, Osmanlı-Türk tiyatrosu, merkez-çevre ilişkileri, Kıbrıs Türk edebiyatı, *Felâket*

## INTRODUCTION

The Tanzimat literary movement (1860–1895)—a Western-influenced cultural transformation initiated under Sultan Abdülmecid's reforms (r. 1839–1861) (Akyüz, n.d., pp. 12–22; Aytaş, 2010, pp. 13–22)—fundamentally reshaped Ottoman cultural production amid Cyprus's political metamorphosis. Istanbul's literary elites enthusiastically adopted Western genres, notably the novel, short story, free verse poetry, and proscenium theater, the latter distinguished by its framed stage architecture (Tanpınar, 1988, pp. 249–300). The arrival and development of theatre in the Ottoman Empire were significantly influenced by the palace's interest in and affection for this art form. For example, Sultan Abdülmecid frequently invited Italian troupes to the palace and had them perform. It is also known that the sultan attended theatres outside the palace, especially Naum's theatre (And, 2025, pp. 28–33). Cypriot Muslim intellectuals engaged with these innovations through three principal conduits: (1) serialized literature in weekly periodicals, (2) disseminated literary anthologies, and (3) performances by amateur theatrical collectives, later supplemented by professional troupes. Remarkably, this cultural transmission persisted uninterrupted even after the 1878 Convention of Defensive Alliance instituted de facto British administration (Clark, 2023, p. 26; Orr, 2013, p. 35), underscoring literature's capacity to transcend geopolitical boundaries during imperial reconfigurations.

It was under this hybrid sovereignty that Cypriot authors composed and published the first Turkish-language theatrical works. However, the absence of a local printing press delayed their publication until after 1878, when the British administration established the island's first print house. This development enabled Turkish-language newspapers in Arabic script to circulate (Yıkık, 2021, p. 15), marking a paradoxical blend of Ottoman cultural identity and colonial infrastructure.

The oldest surviving newspaper from this period, *Zaman* (1891–1900), published in Nicosia from late 1891 (Ünlü, 1981, p. 18), became an unexpected vehicle for Tanzimat literature's delayed arrival in Cyprus. While Istanbul had embraced Western-influenced literary reforms by the 1860s, these trends only reached the island's Ottoman-Turkish press three decades later, crystallizing in *Zaman*'s literary columns and those of subsequent newspapers. Here, a cultural duality emerged: alongside traditional *Divan* poetry, these pages serialized Western genres like novels, short stories, and theatrical works (Yıkık, 2019, p. 138), accelerating the Westernization of Ottoman-Cypriot literature's form and content.

This hybrid literary landscape persisted even as the medium itself evolved. Though these publications initially used Arabic script—a practice continuing from the first 1878 newspapers—the 1930s marked a decisive shift when periodicals adopted the new Turkish alphabet (Mutluyakalı, 2012, pp. 54–55), symbolizing the culmination of both linguistic reform and the Tanzimat's cultural legacy.

Modern Turkish Cypriot literature has traditionally been defined by two main criteria: Cypriot Turkish identity and publication within Cyprus. However, recent scholarship has challenged these boundaries, particularly through examining theater—a Western cultural import that arrived during the Tanzimat reforms. Among the earliest examples are several significant works: Ahmet Tevfik Efendi's *Hicran-ı Ebedi* [Endless Separation] (1895), Kaytazade Mehmet Nazım's *Netice-i İbtıla* [The Consequences of Love] (1908), and Armenian-born Şimşekyan's unfinished *Namus İntikamı yahut Dilenci* [Revenge of Honor or The Beggar] (1898). Şimşekyan's play holds particular interest as it was serialized in the satirical newspaper *Akbaba* [Vulture] (1897–1898), though only its first act appeared before publication ceased (Kabataş et al., 2017, pp. 148–149). Archival sources indicate this was originally planned as a four-act drama (Fedai, 2004, p. 153), making its incomplete publication especially notable.

Scholarly understanding of this literary tradition underwent a significant transformation following Hüseyin Ezilmez's (2022) groundbreaking analysis of Hasan Nefi's *Felaket* [Catastrophe] (1875/2022). Remarkably, even before the book's publication, Ezilmez's public presentations on Nefi's play ignited vigorous debate. Karakartal (2017), building directly on one such presentation, provocatively questioned whether inclusion in national literature necessitated physical publication within territorial borders—a radical challenge to entrenched assumptions about literary geography. In particular, *Felaket*, authored by a Cypriot but published in Istanbul, is the earliest known literary work classed as published in Cyprus. This play, which sidesteps the “local publication” criterion, not only underscores the involvement of Cypriot writers in broader Ottoman literary movements but also illustrates their strategic reliance on Istanbul's publishing networks during British colonial rule.

These publication patterns highlight the ongoing center–periphery dynamics in cultural production during the Tanzimat period. During this time, later Cypriot journals like *Zaman* [Time] (1891–1900) successfully adapted Western literary genres. In contrast, earlier publications remained dependent on imperial capitals for distribution. This distinction reveals both the material constraints of colonial-era printing infrastructure in Cyprus and the asynchronous flow of literary innovations from metropolitan hubs to peripheral regions. Below, our study now shifts to Cypriot Turkish theater, a particularly dynamic yet under-researched aspect of Mediterranean Muslim minority literature that emerged in the late 19th century, focusing on the significant work *Felaket*. *Felaket* is the earliest known printed theatrical text in this tradition, so analysis of its author, Hasan Nefi, offers critical insights into the complex cultural transmission processes of the time.

## **1. Biography of Hasan Nefi (1854–1917)**

Hasan Nefi remains a somewhat obscure figure in Ottoman literary history, with only fragmentary archival traces documenting his life. Born in Cyprus in 1854, he is primarily remembered for his association with Namık Kemal during the latter's exile in Famagusta (1873–76) (Ezilmez, 2019: 421).

This exile was itself theater-related: Kemal had been banished to Cyprus by Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861–1876), who viewed him as a dangerous dissident after the 1873 Istanbul performance of his play *Vatan yahut Silistre* [Homeland or Silistra] sparked unprecedented public enthusiasm (And, 2022, p. 101). As both the play's author and a columnist for *İbret* [A Moral Lesson] newspaper—while also serving on the committee for theatrical development—Kemal represented precisely the kind of intellectual threat the Sultan sought to neutralize through banishment. Notably, the 1908 Famagusta performance of *Vatan yahut Silistre* marked the first staging of a Turkish-language theatrical production in the city, representing a watershed moment in the development of the Cypriot performing arts (Ummannel, 2015, p. 65).

Their relationship, which combined mentorship and collaboration, saw Nefi—then serving as Famagusta's Director of Revenue—assist Kemal as an amanuensis, transcribing dictated works and personal correspondence (Ezilmez, 2022, p. 18). A budding literary figure himself, Nefi composed *Felaket*, a play that Kemal personally edited before arranging its 1875 publication at the Istanbul press belonging to Ahmet Mithat Efendi (1844–1912). This trajectory reveals how personal networks can bridge the gap between the periphery and the center. Without Kemal's intervention, a young Cypriot writer like Nefi might never have accessed Istanbul's premier literary institutions. The choice of publisher carried particular weight. Esen (2014, p. 13) identifies Ahmet Mithat as the most prolific Turkish novelist of the Tanzimat era, having produced more novels than any of his contemporaries. He simultaneously operated a press that became crucial for disseminating works across genres. Though *Felaket*'s text survives, no records confirm its staging, leaving its theatrical reception an open question in Cypriot-Ottoman performance history.

Kemal's surviving letters from Famagusta—138 in total—offer additional insight into their relationship. These documents reveal a bond that fluctuated between camaraderie and paternalistic reproach. Kemal acknowledges Nefi's literary efforts, confirming that he revised Nefi's play and relied on him for clerical assistance, although he criticizes his hurried handwriting (Tansel, 1967, p. 363). The letters also portray Nefi as a loyal but flawed companion: Kemal jokes about his frequent drunkenness and illness (Tansel, 1967, p. 359), laments his refusal to take malaria treatments (Tansel, 1967, p. 373), and mentions commissioning a personalized seal for him from Istanbul (Tansel, 1967, p. 313). Notably, Kemal credits Nefi with editing his *İrfan Paşa'ya Mektup* [Letter to İrfan Pasha] (Tansel, 1967, p. 419), emphasizing Nefi's role in his intellectual circle.

Nefi's trajectory epitomized the complex relationship between the Ottoman center and periphery. Relocating to Istanbul, he transitioned from colonial bureaucrat to high-ranking *bala* official (Kuntay, 2010, pp. 192–193)—a career ascent that ironically coincided with his literary disappearance, as no works beyond *Felaket* have been substantiated. The play's survival as text versus its undocumented performance history presents a telling paradox: while personal connections secured publication

through Ahmet Mithat's press, the work's theatrical viability remains uncertain. This duality informs our analytical framework, examining both its formal qualities (character development and plot structure) and its historical significance as a peripheral writer's negotiated entry into imperial literary networks.

## **2. *Felaket* as a Theatrical Text**

*Felaket* embodies the experimental nature of Tanzimat-era dramatic writing through its complex five-act romantic drama structure. While employing only the unity of action among classical tragedy's three unities (Hall, 2010, p. 29), the play demonstrates an innovative approach to dramatic form through its unconventional sectional divisions. Nefi's structural terminology—using *fasıl* (main act), *perde* (sub-act), and *meclis* (scene)—reflects the transitional state of Ottoman theatrical vocabulary during this period. Contrary to initial appearances of terminological inconsistency, close textual analysis reveals a deliberate hierarchy: each *fasıl* contains multiple *perde* (constituting smaller narrative units), which in turn comprise several *meclis* (scenes). Nefi employs a three-part structure in an effort to blend Western theatrical traditions with Ottoman performance practices.

As Ezilmez (2022, p. 25–26) points out, Nefi's use of certain terms in the text may cause confusion. For instance, his repeated use of the words “fasıl” and “perde” as equivalents of the English word “act” may reflect the uncertainty surrounding the establishment of standardized terminology for Western-style modern theater at that time. Additionally, while organizing the sequences of the second sub-act of the first act, the author mistakenly numbered the third scene twice, leading to inconsistencies in the numbering. Another significant error appears in the third act, which is divided into three sub-acts but gives the impression of containing only two scenes, due to the third sub-act being numbered as two. These inconsistencies may result from compositional errors made by Nefi, which Namık Kemal may have overlooked during his review of the text. They could also stem from typesetting errors at Ahmet Mithat's printing house. These inaccuracies suggest that, even in the capital during the Tanzimat period, when theater was still in its infancy, printing, publishing, and editorial services had not yet achieved a professional standard.

## **3. *Felaket*'s Cast: Between Tradition and Choice**

*Felaket* focuses on the institution of the family, a major theme of Tanzimat literature (Aytaş, 2010, p. 26). In this context, referencing Bourdieu's concept of habitus becomes essential, as it offers a valuable framework for understanding how the characters' behaviors and conflicts are shaped by deeply ingrained social norms and historical conditions. According to Bourdieu (1994), habitus is a characteristic of social actors—whether individuals, groups, or institutions—comprising a system of dispositions shaped by past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and education (p. 170). These dispositions are structured, meaning they follow a patterned logic, and structuring, in that



they actively shape one's perceptions, appreciations, and practices (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). Through the lens of habitus, *Felaket* reveals how individuals internalize the structural dynamics of their environment—particularly those related to family, class, tradition, and gender—and reproduce them in their actions and relationships. Crucially, the central conflict in the play emerges from the parents' decision to choose a marriage partner for their child based on their own habitus—that is, their inherited values, social expectations, and class-based perceptions of suitability. This act not only reflects their internalized social structures but also triggers tension when the child's desires clash with these ingrained norms. Thus, *Felaket* becomes a powerful illustration of how habitus operates within the family unit and how it contributes to the broader socio-cultural transformations of the Tanzimat era.

The plot revolves around the interactions between two families, one wealthy and one lower-class. Although the text does not explicitly state it, as is typical of many works from the same period, it is implied that the story takes place in an unnamed district of Istanbul. In a given neighborhood, affluent and impoverished families reside in close proximity, occupying dwellings that are positioned in direct juxtaposition. One family inhabits a lavish mansion, while the other dwells in a more modest residence.

The first family unit under scrutiny consists of the patriarch, Mecid Efendi; the matriarch, Hesna Hanım; their male offspring, Rifat Bey; and their live-in domestic worker, Serfiraz. The second family unit consists of the widowed father, İbrahim Ağa, and his daughter, Pervin Hanım. Subsequently, Rifat Bey's wife İsmet, to whom he was married under duress, and Mesut, whose union with Pervin Hanım was decreed by Pervin Hanım's father, İbrahim Ağa, become integral elements of the narrative.

Mecid Efendi is portrayed as the antagonist who seeks to prevent Rifat Bey and Pervin Hanım, a couple in a romantic relationship, from entering into matrimony. He represents the authoritarian figure within a patriarchal social structure. From this perspective, equality in social class of both families is viewed as a prerequisite for the institution of marriage. Furthermore, he regards marriage as a financial investment, dismissing the feelings and preferences of the youth as irrelevant. His disregard for his wife Hesna Hanım's opinions in family decision-making highlights the necessity for gender equality. Mecid Efendi has asserted that women cannot possess equal rights with men. The societal status of individuals is considered secondary, and they are expected to conform to the roles assigned to them without the opportunity to express their personal viewpoints.

Hesna Hanım is a compelling figure in the context of wealthy Muslim Ottoman women of the period, who, as a result of their affluence, resided within the confines of a mansion, isolated from the public sphere. In her quotidian life, she fulfils the role of managing the mansion's affairs, supervising the staff, and engaging in handicrafts. Her disposition is characterized by benevolence and empathy. She displays a high degree of devotion to her son. Additionally, she develops a relationship with Pervin Hanım, a girl who is their neighbor and also motherless. She extends an invitation to her home, where

she instructs her in the art of reading, writing, and embroidery. She is noteworthy for her stance on matters of the heart, holding a firm belief that young individuals should be permitted to enter into matrimony with their significant others. She orchestrates meetings between her son and Pervin Hanım at the mansion, circumventing Islamic social norms to enable their interaction. However, within the confines of a patriarchal system, she is ultimately compelled to acquiesce to her husband's directives.

Rifat Bey is portrayed as a seventeen-year-old young man who develops a romantic connection with his neighbor, Pervin Hanım, after observing her from his window. He confides his feelings to his mother, who facilitates a meeting between the young couple. His mother, Hesna Hanım, subsequently informs his father of their intention to marry. However, Mecid Bey opposes the union, citing class differences and economic disparities as his primary objections. Rifat Bey's inability to defy his father is rooted in the prevailing patriarchal order and societal values. Ultimately, he enters into a marriage with his uncle's daughter, İsmet, albeit with hesitation and reluctance. Despite this union, he continues to harbor feelings for Pervin Hanım. Following Pervin Hanım's tragic death from tuberculosis, Rifat Bey turns to alcohol, which ultimately leads to mental instability and suicide.

Pervin Hanım is the thirteen-year-old daughter of a merchant who was raised by her father following the early loss of her mother. It is understood that she did not attend school; instead, she learned embroidery, sewing, and reading through the guidance of Hesna Hanım. Pervin Hanım harbors romantic feelings for Rifat Bey, whom she observes and converses with from her window, yet she is unable to pursue a marriage with him. In an effort to protect her honor, her father arranges her marriage to Mesut, a union she does not desire. Nevertheless, her emotional attachment to Rifat Bey remains strong. Furthermore, İsmet, who feels jealous of Pervin Hanım, engages in actions that lead to the young woman's public humiliation on multiple occasions. Ultimately, Pervin Hanım succumbs to tuberculosis, driven by the profound sorrow of being separated from Rifat Bey, which results in her untimely demise. Pervin Hanım symbolizes the plight of young women in a patriarchal society who are deprived of agency in their personal lives, rendering them victims of their circumstances.

İsmet is Rifat Bey's cousin. Mecid Efendi believes that their union is a suitable match, leading her father to permit the marriage. Although she loves Rifat Bey, he treats her poorly. Upon discovering that Rifat Bey is in love with Pervin Hanım, she retaliates by humiliating Pervin Hanım, showcasing her own wealth through expensive jewelry and clothing. In his pursuit of revenge, Rifat Bey ultimately informs İsmet of his intention to divorce her. Overwhelmed by shock and grief, she suddenly falls ill and passes away. İsmet is depicted as both a victim and a villain. Ultimately, she represents the tragic fate of young women forced into marriages arranged by their fathers within a patriarchal society.

Mesut, a young man of masculine appearance, is considered by İbrahim Ağa to be a suitable candidate for marriage to Pervin Hanım. He is distinguished by his industriousness and his rapid development of strong affection for Pervin Hanım. He strives to ensure his wife's comfort, making every effort to meet



her needs. However, his feelings remain unreciprocated. He later swiftly and decisively kills Mecid Efendi—whom he blames for his wife's death—in an act of retribution. While he is portrayed as a character entrenched in the patriarchal social structure, he also underscores the fact that young men, particularly during that era, endured pain and hardship due to their lack of agency in matters concerning marriage and family.

The play's final secondary figure, Serfiraz, embodies the complex role of enslaved domestic workers in late Ottoman elite households. Her dual responsibilities—serving Hesna Hanım while secretly delivering Rifat Bey's letters to Pervin Hanım—reveal more than just plot mechanics. Through these quiet acts of mediation, we see how enslaved individuals like Serfiraz navigated oppressive systems, wielding subtle influence despite their subjugation. Her presence in the narrative compels us to question how power operated in intimate spaces—where a servant's forced compliance could still shape the destinies of those who claimed to own her.

#### **4. Narrative Structure and Social Contrast in *Felaket***

The play's central romance unfolds as a study in social contrast, where physical spaces become metaphors for entrenched hierarchies. Rifat Bey's privileged existence within his family's mansion—complete with servants like Serfiraz—stands in stark relief to Pervin Hanım's constrained world across the street, marked by maternal absence and precarious middle-class status. Their love story transcends personal tragedy to reveal how class structures actively distort human relationships, transforming affection into transgression.

The opening scenes establish the lovers' physical and social separation through carefully staged tableaux. In their initial encounter, Rifat Bey's confident posture in front of his ancestral home contrasts with Pervin Hanım's hesitant appearances at her upper-floor window—a spatial dynamic that visually reinforces their unequal positions. Their halting exchange, progressing from concealed admiration to tentative confession, demonstrates how architectural barriers paradoxically enable intimacy even as they signify social distance:

“**Rifat Bey (alone):** Why has this girl, who until now remained hidden from me, suddenly appeared so vividly? Surely, there must be a reason—leaning out of the window like that, almost halfway down, as if she might fall into my arms. I keep wondering... could this be connected to me in some way? Is it wrong to think so? Immoral, even? It felt as though she was about to throw herself down just to be seen by me. Wasn't it? And that angelic face—will I ever see it again? Her house is right next to mine, so surely I will. But will I ever get that chance again? That fleeting moment, that stroke of luck... will it ever return (Nefi, 1875/2022, p. 57-“58)<sup>1</sup>”

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<sup>1</sup> From this excerpt onward, all quotations taken from Turkish texts have been translated by us.

**“Pervin (from the window facing the door):** He’s gone... he went to the window across the street... Was he saying those words so that I could hear them? Oh—was that it? He went to the window to look for me. Even if I knew they would kill me, I wouldn’t leave this place. Ah! So he loves me, does he? Then what is there left in this world to fear? Wait... he is a gentleman. And I... I’m just a poor girl. What if we can never be together? If I cannot lie beside him in his bed, then let me find peace only in my grave (Nefi, 1875/2022, p. 58).”

This spatial choreography evolves in subsequent scenes as their windows become sites of emotional revelation. When Pervin Hanım leans from her bedroom window to declare mutual affection, she simultaneously articulates a naive faith in social mobility through her friendship with Hesna Hanım. Her suggestion that Rifat Bey seek maternal approval reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the structural obstacles facing their union—obstacles that Hesna Hanım’s unconventional mentorship only partially mitigate.

Hesna Hanım’s relationship with Pervin Hanım represents a quiet challenge to Ottoman gender norms. By educating the younger woman in literacy and domestic arts typically reserved for elite women, she creates a liminal space where class boundaries temporarily soften. Hesna Hanım’s mentorship reaches its pivotal moment when she orchestrates the lovers’ forbidden meeting in the mansion’s core, deliberately violating the essential Ottoman division between *haremlık* (women’s quarters) and *selamlık* (men’s reception area).

Yet the play also subtly questions whether such individual acts can overcome systemic inequality. Hesna Hanım’s rebellion, while emotionally significant, remains contained within the domestic space and ultimately cannot rewrite the social script governing marriage prospects. The tension between personal agency and structural constraint thus emerges as the drama’s central tragedy—one where windows become both portals of possibility and reminders of immutable divides.

As the narrative unfolds, the oppressive forces of patriarchal authority and class hierarchy methodically dismantle the lovers’ hopes. The text meticulously portrays the Ottoman family structure, where men wield absolute control while women are relegated to passive roles, denied agency in decisions that shape their own lives. This systemic gender imbalance is further reinforced by an unyielding class divide, where economic standing dictates whom one may love or marry.

These oppressive structures underpin Mecid Efendi’s ruthless intervention. As the family’s patriarch, he unilaterally annuls Rifat Bey’s attachment to Pervin Hanım, dismissing her as a “worthless beggar’s daughter” and declaring the match beneath their station:

**“Mecid Efendi:** What good could possibly come from marrying some pauper’s girl? Since when is it your place to wed a shiftless, low-born nobody like her? (...) I will have you marry your uncle’s daughter instead. You know our family’s standing—thank God, neither my brother nor I depend on anyone’s charity. Why should we hand over our wealth to

outsiders? If you unite with her, we'll only grow richer and more secure (Nefi, 1875/2022, p. 67, 69–70)."

Just as windows framed Pervin Hanım and Rifat Bey's fleeting intimacy, Mecid Efendi's decree shatters any illusion of romantic agency:

"**Mecid Efendi:** You be quiet, woman! I know my son's condition better than you ever could. Come here, Rifat! What do you have to say for yourself? Say whatever you like—I've made my decision. You will marry your uncle's daughter. Consider this your notice (Nefi, 1875/2022, p. 70)."

The social mechanisms that once served to separate lovers across physical and symbolic boundaries now reemerge as instruments of constraint, binding Rifat Bey within a framework of calculated kinship obligations. His future is no longer shaped by personal agency but by the imperatives of lineage and legacy, as the directive to marry his cousin, İsmet Hanım, transforms his life into a transaction where familial continuity supersedes individual desire. Within the Ottoman elite context, such consanguineous unions are not anomalies but deliberate strategies of power consolidation, reflecting a system in which economic rationale consistently overrides romantic autonomy. Rather than provoking moral resistance, these arrangements are normalized through institutional acceptance, revealing a cultural logic that privileges dynastic stability over emotional fulfillment. Most significantly, the intergenerational apparatus that enforces Rifat Bey's compliance illustrates how tradition converts intimate relationships into instruments of social reproduction. This process—an alchemy of inherited expectations—renders emotional sacrifice simultaneously obligatory and invisible, sustaining privilege through the subtle coercion embedded in familial duty.

Neither Rifat Bey's protests nor Hesna Hanım's quiet defiance can overturn Mecid Efendi's edict. Their reluctant submission underscores the coercive nature of these systems, where emotional autonomy is sacrificed for material preservation. Mecid's venomous dismissal of Pervin Hanım lays bare the intersection of class contempt and patriarchal domination.

The announcement of Rifat Bey's forced marriage marks the start of Pervin Hanım's unraveling. When Mecid Efendi publicly maligns her character—accusing her of corrupting his household—İbrahim Ağa, her devoted but desperate father, rushes to secure her future through a hasty marriage to Mesut. In a society where a woman's honor dictates her family's standing, he has no choice but to act. His anguished warning to Pervin Hanım reveals the high stakes:

"**İbrahim Ağa:** You're just a child! But you've become a child who understands words, so I'm telling you. That man just called me over, claiming he's found a girl for his son, that his son loves her—but that you, like a devil, have crept into the lady's [his wife's] mind, that you appear at the window for his son, that you do who knows what!" (Nefi, 1875/2022, p. 81)."

His remarks highlight the intersection of patriarchal authority and communal discourse, wherein young women are disproportionately subjected to moral evaluation. Far from ensuring stability, these coerced marriages unleash cycles of suffering: Rifat Bey, trapped in a loveless union, seeks escape in alcoholism and emotional neglect, while his wife İsmet—consumed by resentment over her husband's lingering attachment to Pervin Hanım—becomes the architect of the young woman's daily torment. She subjects Pervin Hanım to systematically administered humiliations, transmuting the putative sanctuary of marriage into a state of perpetual anguish. Having already sustained profound emotional devastation from the forced severance of her romantic attachment, she subsequently suffers the cruel irony of punitive retribution for affections she was compelled to renounce.

The lovers' anguish sears itself into their very flesh—Pervin Hanım wastes away, consumed by tuberculosis, while Rifat Bey's psyche fractures irreparably at news of her decline. In a grotesque twist of self-deception, he turns his rage on İsmet, severing their marriage with such brutal finality that the shock alone strikes her dead. When Rifat Bey at last stumbles to Pervin Hanım's sickbed, their reunion sparks not solace but bitter reproach: she excoriates him for his cowardice and complicity in İsmet's death, while he clutches at hollow declarations of undying love. Their fingers intertwine for one trembling moment as Pervin Hanım breathes her last—this fragile contact serving as both farewell and trigger for Rifat Bey's final descent into madness.

The play's harrowing conclusion lays bare the obliteration of all social order:

**“Rifat (with rising intensity):** Step aside! Pervin is calling me—I must go to her! Who do you think you are, the chief of the Janissaries? Why are you interfering? Move out of my way! I swear I'll destroy you! *(He violently shoves Mecid aside and rushes toward the window. Hesna, frail and ill, tries to stop him. Rifat pushes himself forward once more, pulling Hesna with him. Both of them fall from the window together.)* (Nefi, 1875/2022, p. 81).”

Rifat Bey, now unmoored from reason, stalks the mansion's shadowed halls, tormented by phantoms of both lost women—his dead wife and his departed beloved. His climactic plunge through the window, with Hesna Hanım's desperate grasp only hastening his fall, transforms the domestic space into a theater of intergenerational ruin. This grotesque symmetry finds its completion when Mesut, now embodying the wrath of the oppressed, wraps his hands around Mecit Efendi's throat. The patriarch's choking gasp becomes the ultimate metaphor: a social order that suffocates its subjects must itself be strangled into silence.

## 5. Recontextualizing *Felaket*: Transcultural Dialogue in Tanzimat Theater

We suggest that *Felaket* transcends its superficial guise as a conventional tragic romance—where doomed lovers perish in predictable Tanzimat fashion<sup>2</sup>—to articulate a far more significant cultural negotiation. The work actively dismantles the center–periphery binary, performing a sophisticated mediation between Western Romantic conventions and indigenous Ottoman narrative traditions. This creative synthesis generates a hybrid theatrical language that doesn't merely reflect but critically engages with the Tanzimat era's cultural ambivalence. Rather than passive imitation, the text constructs an active dialogue between European dramatic forms and local performance heritage, positioning itself as both an artistic product and a conscious commentator on its transformative historical moment.

On the surface, the play employs well-established tropes of the period: the thwarted romance between Rifat Bey (the privileged elite) and Pervin Hanım (the marginalized artisan's daughter); the patriarchal interdiction enforced by Mecit Efendi; the lovers' somatized suffering (Rifat Bey's alcoholism and madness, Pervin Hanım's tubercular decline); and the climactic acts of retributive violence. These elements mirror European Romantic dramas (Ezilmez, 2022, pp. 43–44), particularly Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* where all but one scene unfolds within Verona's walls (Shakespeare, 1597/2006, 2.2.1–2), as seen in the iconic window/garden dialogues that *Felaket* (Ezilmez, 2022, pp. 57–59) reconfigures through the lens of Ottoman gender segregation.

In a similar vein, the motif of forbidden love enduring beyond death is central to Namık Kemal's *Zavallı Çocuk* (*The Poor Child*, 1873/2021), which presents a poignant meditation on thwarted youthful affection culminating in the demise of both protagonists due to familial resistance. Through this narrative, Kemal explores the emotional consequences of rigid social structures, particularly those governing marriage and generational authority, thereby reinforcing the theme of constrained agency among youth. Unlike *Felaket*, the romantic bond in *Zavallı Çocuk* unfolds between two relatives raised within the same domestic space. Fourteen-year-old Şefika Hanım harbors deep affection for Ata Bey, a 19-year-old medical student and distant relative who has grown up alongside her. Their mutual love is disrupted when Şefika's mother, Tahire, seeking to settle her husband's debts, coerces her daughter into marrying a wealthy 38-year-old Pasha :

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<sup>2</sup> Töre (2021, p. 1586) observes that Tanzimat literature accorded significant thematic prominence to familial structures, particularly their oppressive regulation of marital choice. Within this framework, narratives frequently depicted young lovers—denied agency in matrimonial decisions—facing three possible trajectories: (1) suicidal despair, (2) tubercular decline (a condition symbolically linked to unconsummated love in the period's literary imagination), or (3) consignment to lifelong unhappiness through compulsory unions. These tropes collectively functioned as social critique, exposing the destructive consequences of patriarchal marital economics.

“Şefika (pleading): Mother, please! Why are you pressing me so hard? Have you no mercy for your own daughter? Don't give me to the Pasha—kill me instead! I swear, I would rather die!”

“Tahire: For God's sake! Will this child too come to know our misfortune? What harm is there, you ask? You know affection, yes—but what good comes from knowing the cruelty of the world? My daughter, you do not know your father's former glory, his power, his place in the world. If you did, you would understand my words more easily. Now we are poor. We live on two thousand kuruş (coins) a month. No matter—we survive. But your father owes five hundred purses. The moneylender is dead, and now his heirs demand payment. If the marriage happens, the Pasha will offer your father's debt note as your dowry. Do you understand now? Do you wish to see your precious father rot in prison? To see me die of grief? To see your delicate little brother wander barefoot through the streets? Is that the fate you want for us (Kemal, 1873/2021, p. 24)?”

The psychological and physical toll of this coercion leads Şefika to succumb to tuberculosis, and upon discovering her on her deathbed, Ata Bey commits suicide by ingesting poison. Both characters ultimately perish, victims of emotional devastation. Crucially, the impediment to their union does not stem from a tyrannical father figure, as in *Felaket*. On the contrary, Şefika's father, Halil Bey, endorses the relationship and supports his daughter's wish to marry Ata Bey. It is her mother, Tahire Hanım, who obstructs the marriage. Consequently, while *Zavallı Çocuk* does not replicate the overt patriarchal oppression depicted in *Felaket*, it nonetheless underscores the constrained agency of youth within the institution of marriage. In this respect, a thematic resonance emerges between the two plays, particularly in their portrayal of young individuals as subject to familial and societal constraints.

Although *Zavallı Çocuk* does not portray patriarchal authority with the same overt severity as *Felaket*, it nonetheless highlights the limited autonomy young individuals have in matters of marriage. In this respect, the two plays are thematically similar in their depiction of youth as subject to familial and societal constraints. Building on this thematic connection, the structural differences between the two works further distinguish their approaches. Specifically, *Felaket* features a more expansive cast of characters than *Zavallı Çocuk*, enabling a more nuanced examination of class conflict through the interactions and contrasts between individuals from different social classes. Furthermore, while *Zavallı Çocuk* confines its dramatic action to a single mansion, *Felaket* unfolds across multiple settings—including the homes of both families, the street between them, and various public and private spaces—which enriches its spatial and social dynamics. Taken together, these elements suggest that Nefi was influenced by Namık Kemal's *Zavallı Çocuk* in terms of thematic focus and the portrayal of class tensions. However, his approach in *Felaket* reflects an ambition to surpass his predecessor's work by constructing a play with greater structural complexity and broader sociopolitical scope. Moreover, in line with Bourdieu's (1990, 1994) concept of habitus, both plays illustrate how young couples are



unable to marry due to internalized social norms and expectations—particularly parental authority—that shape and constrain their choices. This reveals how individual agency is subordinated to the dispositions formed within familial and societal structures. Such thematic continuity opens the way for exploring love as a disruptive force.

In the same vein, the motif of forbidden love enduring beyond death evokes Namık Kemal's *Vatan Yahut Silistre* (2022), wherein romantic and nationalist ideals converge through spatially transgressive encounters—such as İslam Bey's clandestine window entrance<sup>3</sup>. While *Felaket*'s motifs resist reduction to Western influence alone, its dialogue with Eastern traditions—particularly Fuzuli's (2024) *Leyla ile Mecnun* [Leyla and Majnun], written in 1536<sup>4</sup>—reveals love's subversive power as a force that unravels reason. Like Mecnun, Rifat Bey spirals into hallucinatory madness, his spectral visions of Pervin Hanım and İsmet Hanım haunting the mansion's corridors as relentlessly as Mecnun's delirium consumes the desert. The lovers' twin fates—Pervin Hanım's death from lovesickness and Rifat Bey's fatal collapse—mirror the 'mesnevi's (mathnawi's)<sup>5</sup> Sufi-inflected conclusion (Ezilmez, 2022, pp. 45–46), where love's culmination is annihilation or *fana* (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, n.d.). Yet this intertextual engagement transcends mere structural parallelism; it erupts into the domestic sphere through charged confrontations that expose tradition's ideological malleability.

The confrontation between Hesna Hanım's affective entreaty, “Sir! The boy loves the girl deeply” (Nefi, 1875/2022, p. 75) and Mecid Efendi's reductive intertextual mockery, “Maşallah! What next—shall we call them Leyla and Mecnun? Enough! These poetic fantasies bring only disgrace” (Nefi, 1875/2022, p. 75) epitomizes the ideological tensions surrounding romantic discourse in the text. Nefi strategically deploys Fuzuli's (2024) canonical work to expose competing interpretations of love: where Hesna Hanım's emotional appeal implicitly aligns with Sufi poetics' sanctification of desire (as exemplified in *Leyla ile Mecnun*'s concept of transcendental *fana*), Mecid appropriates the same literary tradition as a disciplinary mechanism, framing passionate love as both derivative and socially

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<sup>3</sup> Tanpınar (1998) notes that a critical essay by Mizancı Murad—one of the prominent Tanzimat-era novelists—criticized Namık Kemal regarding the scene in question, which conflicted with Islamic communal values in the play. However, Tanpınar observes that Murad had overlooked Shakespeare's balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, thereby indirectly referencing the Shakespearean influence on Namık Kemal (p. 380).

<sup>4</sup> *Leyla and Majnun* is a renowned *mesnevi* of love and suffering written by the 16th-century poet Fuzuli. The story originates from an ancient Arabic legend with Mesopotamian roots. For detailed analysis, see Banarlı, N. S. (1998).

<sup>5</sup> The *mesnevi* (mathnawi), while Arabic in etymology, emerged as a distinctly Persian verse form within Pahlavi poetic traditions, developing into the pre-eminent vehicle for book-length narrative poems through its innovative couplet structure (*beyit*). Unlike the monorhyme constraints of forms like the *gazel*, its flexible aa/bb/cc rhyme scheme—with each distich maintaining autonomous end-rhymes—allowed for the expansive scope required by complex Oriental narrative traditions (Banarlı, 1998, pp. 197–198). This structural adaptability enabled the composition of seminal works spanning didactic fables (*Kelile ve Dimne*), picaresque adventures (*Sindbadname*), dynastic epics (*Şehname*), courtly romances (*Hüsrev ü Şirin*), Sufi allegories (*Leyla ve Mecnun*), and Alexander romances (*İskendername*). As Banarlı (1998) documents, the *mesnevi* became both a technical achievement in Persianate poetics and a cultural repository for pre-modern Islamic literary imagination (pp. 197–198).

subversive. This dialogic exchange demonstrates how Sufi archetypes—precisely those that ennoble Rifat Bey and Pervin Hanım's doomed union through annihilative love—are reconfigured as instruments of patriarchal regulation, revealing tradition's paradoxical capacity to both authorize and suppress transgressive emotions.

This interplay of influences reveals *Felaket*'s broader significance as a work that exemplifies Tanzimat theater's mediation between global literary currents and local narrative practices. The text neither merely imitates Western models nor reproduces Eastern tropes, but rather critically recontextualizes both traditions. The window scenes, for instance, transform Shakespeare's balcony motif into a site of Ottoman gender politics, where Hesna Hanım must facilitate the lovers' interaction to circumvent *haremlık-selamlık* divisions (Ezilmez, 2022, pp. 57–59). Similarly, the tuberculosis motif—a staple of 19th-century European melodrama (Akı, 1963, p. 101)—acquires new semantic dimensions when considered within Ottoman literary depictions of consumptive love.

Ultimately, the literary significance of *Felaket* lies in its synthesis of Eastern and Western narrative traditions, offering a valuable lens through which to examine the transnational dimensions of Tanzimat-era literature. As a young dramatist from the periphery—specifically Famagusta, Cyprus—who had met Namık Kemal in person and consciously modeled his work on Kemal's theatrical legacy, Nefi positions *Felaket* within a lineage that bridges Ottoman and European storytelling conventions. His play reflects a deliberate engagement with both indigenous and imported motifs, demonstrating how Tanzimat authors negotiated cultural modernity through hybrid forms. By tracing the transformation of narrative elements as they traverse geographies—from the balconies of Verona to the gendered interiors of Istanbul, or from the Arabian desert to the urban neighborhoods of the late Ottoman Empire—*Felaket* reveals the adaptive strategies of a literary periphery responding to global currents. Through this intertextual and intercultural dialogue, Nefi not only pays homage to his predecessor but also contributes to the evolving aesthetic and ideological contours of Ottoman dramatic literature. Ultimately, *Felaket*'s value lies in its synthesis of these traditions, offering a lens through which to examine Tanzimat literature's transnational dialogue. By tracing how motifs mutate as they travel—from Verona's balconies to Istanbul's gendered interiors, or from the Arabian desert to the Ottoman neighborhoods of 19th-century Istanbul—we uncover the adaptive strategies of a periphery negotiating cultural modernity on its own terms.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen, analyzing *Felaket* within the framework of Tanzimat theater fundamentally disrupts simplistic paradigms of unidirectional Western cultural dominance. Far from constituting mere imitation, the play embodies an active dialectic between Ottoman narrative conventions and global theatrical forms—a creative negotiation that both reflected and contested the center-periphery tensions defining the era's cultural production.

This process finds its human dimension in the intellectual alliance between Hasan Nefi and Namık Kemal. Kemal's Cypriot exile, rather than terminating his scholarly influence, paradoxically positioned him as a critical nexus between imperial and provincial literary spheres. His editorial intervention in *Felaket*'s publication is also noteworthy. He secured its debut in Istanbul despite Cyprus's lack of printing infrastructure. This intervention facilitated the playwright's entry into Ottoman literary circles and symbolically reinscribed the periphery into the cultural cartography of the empire.

Building upon the foundational work of Akı (1999), And (2012, 2025), and Töre (2021), this study demonstrates how Tanzimat theater engaged in deliberate synthesis rather than passive appropriation of transnational influences. *Felaket*'s strategic reworking of Shakespearean tragedy and classical Eastern narratives—particularly *Leyla ile Mecnun*—serves as a methodological blueprint for analyzing Ottoman cultural hybridity. Through its interrogation of forbidden love, spatial transgression, and embodied trauma, the play transcends derivative intertextuality to assert a distinctive creative sovereignty—one that reveals how peripheral authors simultaneously navigated and subverted imperial cultural economies.

For Turkish Cypriot literature, Nefi's legacy constitutes nothing less than an epistemological rupture. As the island's inaugural published playwright, he engineered an aesthetic conduit between local experience and imperial discourse—his oeuvre functioning simultaneously as literary monument and testament to the porosity of cultural boundaries. *Felaket*'s very existence dismantles the myth of provincial passivity, demonstrating how marginalized artists actively appropriated and reinterpreted metropolitan forms to articulate local realities.

The center-periphery dialectic articulated through *Felaket* retains its analytical importance. The historical contingencies of cultural mobility, mediated through mentorship networks and institutional access, find striking parallels in contemporary creative economies. Just as Nefi's connection to Kemal enabled his literary recognition, marginalized voices today must still navigate similar hierarchies of cultural capital and digital visibility. Thus, the play emerges not merely as a historical artifact, but also as a transhistorical case study in creative resistance. Its relevance remains undiminished in an era where algorithmic gatekeeping has replaced the barriers of the print revolution.

Furthermore, this investigation sheds light on the modernization of Cypriot Turkish literature as a unique Mediterranean minority tradition. Theater is at the forefront of its engagement with center-periphery dynamics. The study's findings lay the groundwork for future research on the comparative modernization of literature. Topics include the roles of exile and dislocation in cultural transmission, the empowerment of peripheral regions through print networks, and the gendered dimensions of literary modernization. Together, these findings affirm the indispensable role of field studies in

understanding the complex relationship between spatial politics and cultural production—a scholarly imperative that transcends historical periods and geographic boundaries.

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