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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Poisoning Cases in the Ottoman Empire and the Most Common Poisons Used in the Nineteenth Century

Osmanlı Devleti'nde Zehirleme Vakaları ve On Dokuzuncu Yüzyılda En Sık Kullanılan Zehirler

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study examines how nineteenth-century transformations in pharmacy, toxicology, and poison regulation unfolded in Europe and within the Ottoman Empire's resulting hybrid system, comparing their distinct reform trajectories. Drawing upon Ottoman court records, the research demonstrates how toxic substances impacted medicine, crime, and public health, while also revealing the gendered legal and social dynamics surrounding poisoning cases.
Methods: This study analyzes twenty nineteenth-century Ottoman poisoning cases using archival court records and registers from the early nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Cases were classified by perpetrator gender and the types of poisons used. The study also evaluates how limited forensic tools, reliance on testimony, and the gradual adoption of European toxicological methods.
Results: The findings show that women were the primary perpetrators in nineteenth-century Ottoman poisoning cases, responsible for fifteen of twenty incidents, mostly targeting husbands. Poisons were typically domestic and accessible, especially sıçan otu (rat poison) and aksülümen (mercuric chloride). Most cases were fatal, with 18 deaths, and evidence often relied on testimony rather than forensic proof.
Conclusions: The study concludes that poisons were integral to nineteenth-century Ottoman domestic, medical, and legal life, blurring the line between remedy and harm. Women, constrained by patriarchal limits, often used accessible household toxins such as arsenic and plant-based poisons in marital conflicts. Courts struggled to prove poisoning due to limited forensic tools and reliance on testimony, yet punishments ranged widely. By the late century, Ottoman legal practice began integrating medical examinations and European toxicology, marking a gradual shift toward modern forensic justice.

Keywords: Forensic medicine, history of medicine, Ottoman Empire, Sharia court records, toxicology.

ÖZ

Amaç: Bu çalışma, 19. yüzyılda eczacılık, toksikoloji ve zehirlerle ilgili düzenlemelerin dönüşümünü Avrupa ve Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun karma sisteminde nasıl gerçekleştiğini inceleyerek, bu dönüşümlerin farklı reform süreçlerini karşılaştırmaktadır. Osmanlı mahkeme kayıtlarının kullanıldığı çalışmadan, zehirlerin tıp, suç ve halk sağlığını nasıl etkilediği ortaya koyulurken, aynı zamanda zehirlenme vakalarını çevreleyen toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı hukuki ve sosyal dinamikler açığa çıkarılmıştır.
Gereç ve Yöntemler: Bu çalışma, on dokuzuncu yüzyıldan erken yirminci yüzyıla uzanan arşiv kayıtları ve kadı defterlerine dayanarak yirmi zehirlenme vakasını incelemektedir. Vakalar, failin cinsiyetine ve kullanılan zehir türlerine göre sınıflandırılmıştır. Çalışma ayrıca sınırlı adli tıp araçlarının, tanıklığa dayalı soruşturmanın ve Avrupa toksikoloji yöntemlerinin aşamalı olarak benimsenmesinin etkilerini de değerlendirmektedir.
Bulgular: Bulgular, on dokuzuncu yüzyıl Osmanlı zehirleme vakalarında kadınların başlıca fail olduğunu, yirmi olayın on beşinden sorumlu olduklarını ve çoğunlukla kocalarını hedef aldıklarını göstermektedir. Kullanılan zehirler genellikle ev içi ve kolay erişilebilir maddeler olup özellikle sıçan otu (fare zehri) ve aksülümen (cıva klorür) öne çıkmaktadır. Vakaların çoğu ölümle sonuçlanmış, toplam 18 ölüm gerçekleşmiş ve kanıtlar çoğu kez adlî tıptan ziyade tanıklığa dayanmıştır.
Sonuçlar: Çalışma, on dokuzuncu yüzyılda Osmanlı'nın gündelik hayatında zehirlerin, tıbbi ve hukuki yaşamın ayrılmaz bir parçası olduğunu; ilaç ile zehir arasındaki sınırın çoğu zaman belirsiz olduğunu ortaya koymuştur. Ataerkil hayat tarzının parçası olan kadınlar, özellikle arsenik ve bitkisel zehirler gibi kolay erişilebilir ev içi toksinleri evlilik ile ilgili sorunlarında sıkça kullanmışlardır. Mahkemeler, sınırlı teknik soruşturma ve tanıklığa dayanma nedeniyle zehirlemeyi kanıtlamakta zorlanmış, ancak verilen cezalar farklılıklar göstermiştir. Yüzyılın sonlarına doğru Osmanlı hukuk pratiği tıbbî muayeneleri ve Avrupa toksikolojisini benimsemeye başlamış, bu da modern adli tıp sistemine doğru kademeli bir geçişin ilk aşaması olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tıp Tarihi, Toksikoloji, Adli Tıp, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Şeriyye Sicilleri

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Introduction

The nineteenth century saw a decisive transformation in the history of European pharmacy. The discipline evolved from a traditional craft based on pharmaceutical practices to a more professional and scientifically focused field shaped by developments in chemistry, medicine, and government regulation. At the beginning of the century, pharmacies were largely family businesses, passed down from generation to generation, where practitioners prepared and dispensed medicines derived from plant, animal, and occasionally mineral sources. These pharmacists occupied an ambiguous position between artisanal producers and medical assistants, supplying medicines to both physicians and the public [1]. However, the accelerating pace of scientific discovery soon changed this landscape. The isolation of active plant alkaloids led to the discovery of morphine from opium in 1804, quinine from cinchona officinalis in 1820, strychnine from nux vomica in 1818, and then cocaine from coca leaves in 1859. This marked a turning point in pharmacy, as it increasingly focused on the extraction, standardization, and quantification of active ingredients rather than relying on crude plant preparations [2, 3, 4, 5].

The dictionary defines poison as "سم" (zehir), and its French equivalent is "poison." A poison is a substance that enters the body through various means and disrupts its balance, either permanently or temporarily [6]. Knowing the specific poison determines the dosage required for preparing the antidote. In the Ottoman Empire, both poison (ecza-ı semiye) and its antidote were called medicines [7]. For example, the plague microbe was identified as a poison [8]. The nineteenth century witnessed a relationship in which poisons and drugs emerged side by side. Poisons were indispensable for medical treatment, industrial production, and domestic life, while simultaneously contributing to increased epidemics, mortality, and crime rates. Advances in chemistry and toxicology facilitated the widespread use of toxic substances and enabled their systematic identification within the context of forensic medicine for the first time. Consequently, this century became a defining period in the modern history of poisons. For example, in Konya in 1704, during the traditional practice of examining a person who had died of leprosy, areas showing symptoms, such as the hands, feet, and face, were examined. Whether the wounds were caused by a sharp object or were self-inflicted was crucial [9].

The development of pharmacy progressed alongside the control of poisons. The first regulations concerning the distribution and control of poisons were established in France. The preparation and distribution of poisons were prohibited in France in 1682, and non-compliance was punished with the death penalty [10]. This regulation not only strengthened the scientific legitimacy of pharmacy but also brought it closer to laboratory chemistry, leading to the emergence of the concept of the pharmacist as a chemist rather than simply a dispenser of traditional medicines. Simultaneously, the pharmacy profession began to become more regulated and institutionalized throughout Europe. After the Napoleonic reforms, France began to effectively centralize control with the establishment of the École de Pharmacie in 1803, which required pharmacists to undergo formal training, examinations, and state licensing. Similar developments occurred in Germany, where the guild system, combined with research-oriented universities, became an influential structure [11]. Justus von Liebig's work in organic chemistry and biochemistry fostered the development of German pharmacy and pharmaceutical chemistry [12]. Although slower to formalize training, England saw the founding of the Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain in 1841, which promoted professional standards and aimed to distinguish qualified pharmacists from unlicensed drug dealers. In one case of a death from similarly dated drug adulteration, the pharmacist was sentenced to nine months' imprisonment [13].

The Ottoman Empire appears to have progressed simultaneously with modernization and chemical specialization. Prior to this, knowledge of the chemical and mineral composition of poisons was quite limited. The terms "sem" and "ağu" (poison) were used synonymously [14]. Kocacık and Mat examined poisoning cases and the types of poisons used in Istanbul between 1846 and 1917. This study identified that poisoning or inducing substances were sold in herbalists, and that there were problems with their dosage. Consequently, an herbalist regulation was enacted in 1885, restricting the sale of poisonous drugs and substances. Copperware, plants, and chemicals were among the primary causes of poisoning [13]. These reforms reflected broader concerns about the dangers of counterfeiting, the abuse of powerful new substances, and the growing importance of public health. The intersection of pharmacy and toxicology also emerged prominently during this period. Pharmacists contributed to the identification and regulation of poisons in both medical and forensic contexts. Arsenic, opium, and cyanide, commonly found in pharmacies, became the subject of frequent criminal investigations. England began enacting poison control laws such as the Pharmacy Act of 1868 [15]. Pharmacy became a state regulated profession in the Ottoman Empire [16]. The textbook on pharmaceutical science, printed by the Dersaadet Mahmud Bey printing house, originating in France and England, served as a dictionary for the preparation of medications. The book illustrated pharmacy procedures and techniques, and also explained the dosage and ingredients of the medications to be prepared [17].

Pharmacies in Europe and the Ottoman Empire shared a common path in terms of professionalization, regulation, and toxicological awareness. However, the Ottoman example reflected a hybrid model in which traditional herbal medicine continued alongside European-inspired reforms. By this time, Ottoman texts defined all poisons as "ağu" [18]. Modern penal codes, along with the regulation of pharmacy activities, were adopted. The first regulation concerning pharmacy in the Ottoman Empire was the 1852 regulation entitled "Nizamnâme-i Eczacıyan Der Memalik-i Osmaniye." This regulation specified the

rights and responsibilities of pharmacists' shops and pharmacy workers, and pharmacy shops previously affiliated with foundations were brought under the control of the Counsel of Health. Pharmacy became subject to education and diplomas, preventing other professions, such as doctors and herbalists, from practicing pharmacy [19]. Becoming a pharmacist required two years of training at the Imperial School of Medicine and six years of work in a pharmacy [20].

In the Ottoman Empire, as in much of the nineteenth-century Europe, poison was closely associated with women both in legal records and cultural discourse. Ottoman court registers (sicils) reveal numerous cases in which women used poison as a method of murder. These cases not only shed light on the practical use of toxic substances but also highlight broader dynamics of gender, domestic authority, and the administration of justice within the Ottoman world. The substances most commonly encountered in Ottoman poisoning cases were not exotic or rare, but drawn from everyday life. Arsenic (sublimate) and opium (afyon) were easily accessible in pharmacies and markets, where women could purchase them under the pretext of medical or household needs. Their use in home remedies, cooking, and pest control gave women opportunities to secretly administer poison, often while preparing food or drink. Court records show that many female poisoners targeted close male relatives, most often husbands or fathers-in-law. These dynamics underscore the limited options available to women within the patriarchal household. Poison served as a weapon for women in discordant households, enabling them to resist abusive relationships or unwanted marriages. Thus, acts of poisoning were intertwined with broader issues of gendered power relations, inheritance, and honor.

Materials and Methods

This study will classify the cases whether it was perpetrated by a woman or a man, along with the statistics which substances were used as poison. The cases were chosen in the 19th century. The registers were obsessed from Ottoman archives and court records. To maximize the objectivity a certain time frame from the early the nineteenth century to the early 20th century was set and archival registers were used in each case. Ottoman judges and physicians faced significant challenges in adjudicating poisoning cases. The overlap between poison and drug, combined with the limited forensic tools available before the widespread adoption of European toxicological methods, made judicial certainty difficult. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, Ottoman courts, influenced by European forensic science, increasingly sought expert opinions from chief physicians and employed primitive chemical tests. However, in many cases, decisions relied on witness testimony, neighborhood gossip, and confessions rather than definitive toxicological evidence. Therefore, twenty cases recorded as poisonings were considered.

Statistical Analysis

Gender Dynamics: Female poisoners: 15 cases; Male poisoners: 4 cases; Self-poisoning: 1 case. Most victims were male (17/20), highlighting domestic dynamics (wives targeting husbands). Conversely, the victims were predominantly male—17 out of 20 cases (85%)—with 13 (65%) being husbands poisoned by their wives. Only three victims (15%) were female, including one self-poisoning and one dual poisoning.

Substances Used: Sıçan Otu: 7 cases; Aksülümen: 3 cases; Food-based poisoning: 4 cases; Generic poison: 6 cases

Punishment Patterns: Half of all cases resulted in imprisonment or hard labor, and one-quarter led to execution, showing that poisoning was treated as a grave, often premeditated offense. However, the existence of acquittals and reduced sentences indicates that judicial discretion—and possibly evidentiary uncertainty—played a significant role.

This heterogeneity suggests a transitional legal landscape, moving from moral adjudication based on confession and intent (as in Ebussuud's era) to modern criminal codification emphasizing evidence and procedure. Some poisoners were freed (due to lack of evidence), women generally received lighter sentences, even in fatal cases.

Mortality: 18 deaths, 1 survival, 1 unintended victim. Poisoning was mostly lethal, and evidence relied on witnesses, gossip, and confession, not forensic certainty.

Results

In the examined Ottoman poisoning cases of the the nineteenth century, women predominantly utilized plant-based and easily accessible toxic substances, with sıçan otu (rat poison) and aksülümen emerging as the most frequently employed poisons. These substances were common in domestic and commercial environments, making them relatively easy to obtain without attracting suspicion. Their discreet nature allowed women who were often confined to the household sphere and lacked access to weapons associated with overt violence to employ poisoning as a covert means of resolving personal or marital conflicts. This pattern reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics in which women, constrained by patriarchal norms and legal limitations, resorted to methods aligned with domestic resources. Furthermore, the use of these substances underscores the blurred boundaries between medicine and poison in the Ottoman context, where the same compounds could serve therapeutic purposes in small doses and lethal ones in larger quantities. This duality not only complicated legal adjudication but also reinforced the association of women with poisoning in both judicial records and cultural discourse.

Discussion

Nineteenth-century Ottoman poisoning cases reveal that women frequently employed substances that were both accessible within the household and familiar through medical or domestic practices. These poisons

Table 1. Characteristics of poisoning cases obtained from court records (Hijri date)

Date	Poisoned/Sex	Poisoner/Sex	Relationship	Poison	Decision	Result
01-05-1284	Yusuf/Male	Andon/Male	Commercial	Ice cream	Claim	Death (21)
08-11-1282	Mehmed/Male	Fatıma/Female	Husband/Wife	Food	Five years of prison	Death (22)
22-01-1277	Ahmed/Male	Hatice/Female	Husband/Wife	Aksülümen	Prison	Ten days of intensive care (23)
20-05-1264	İsmail and Ali/Male	Hasan/Male	Stepfather	Poison	Seven Years of prison	Death (24)
24-06-1280	Peto/Female	Peto/Female		Poison	Five mecidiye and one year of prison	Death after four days (25)
28-09-1278	Mehmed/Male	Ayşe/Female	Husband/Wife	Poison	Prison of fifteen years	Death (26)
09-01-1278	Vulçu/Male	Miladno/Female	Husband/Wife	Sıçan Otu	Prison of six months and one mecidiye	Death of another man (27)
27-06-1259	Hasan/Male	Hüsna/Female	Husband/Wife	Food with aksülümen	Two years of prison	Death (28)
27-02-1278	Ümmügülsüm/Female	Ali/Male	Husband/Wife	Sıçan Otu	Pharmacist is freed	Death (29)
22-04-1278	Hasan/Male	Emine/Female	Kıptiyan	Sıçan Otu	Freed after one and half year in prison	Death (30)
21-03-1274	Mehmed/Male	Ali/Male	Stepfather	Poison	?	Death (31)
21-12-1290	Todor/Male	Mariya and Bervu / Female	Husband/Wife	Poisoning along with squeezing of testicles (husye)	Three years of kürek	Death (32)
05-10-1290	Fermanu/Male	Nuriye/Female	Husband/Wife	Halva with poison (aksülümen)	Prison of fifteen years	Death (33)
07-02-1264	Hasan and Hatice/Male-Female	Hatice/Female	Husband-Mother-in-law/Wife	Sıçan otu	Prison of five years	Death (34)
19-01-1286	İstefan/Male	Katinko/Female	Husband/Wife	Sıçan otu	Prison of fifteen years	Death (35)
16-02-1279	Hüseyin/Male	Fatma/Female	Husband/Wife	Fare otu	Execution	Death (36)
10-11-1321	Ali/Male	Gülistan/Female	Husband/Wife	Ağu	Execution	Death (37)
14-04-1325	Musa/Male	Abde/Female	Husband/Wife	Sıçan otu	Execution	Death (38)
04-11-1325	Ahmet/Male	Zekiye/Female	Son/Mother	Arsenic	Execution	Death (39)
26-04-1284	Osman/Male	Asiye/Female	Husband/Wife	White poison	Prison?	Death (40)

were not exotic imports but everyday compounds whose therapeutic and toxic boundaries were often blurred, complicating judicial efforts to distinguish between deliberate homicide and accidental overdose. The primary categories of poisons involved in both documented cases and medical-legal discourse included arsenic and its derivatives, plant-based toxins, and mercury compounds, all of which played significant roles in Ottoman domestic life and pharmacology. Statistically, the dataset presents a clear pattern: poisoning in the Ottoman Empire was a predominantly female-perpetrated, domestically situated, and highly lethal crime, punished variably but seriously by the courts.

Arsenic: Arsenic occupied a unique position in Ottoman toxicology as both a common household substance and a symbol of criminal poisoning. Employed in pest control, textile dyes, and even cosmetics, it was odorless and tasteless, making it an ideal poison to mix with food or drink. Although arsenic-based compounds like arsenic trioxide were not explicitly mentioned in the twenty court cases analyzed, references to sıçan otu (rat herb, Schweinfurter Grün)—a preparation often containing arsenic—indicate its functional role in similar contexts [13]. Women appear to have exploited its invisibility and easy integration into meals, aligning with a pattern seen in European toxicology, where arsenic was dubbed the "inheritance powder" for its association with covert domestic murders [41]. Judicial challenges were compounded by the fact that arsenic symptoms mimicked cholera, a frequent epidemic in the Ottoman world, thus delaying detection. While European courts, following the Marsh test of 1836, began systematically convicting arsenic poisoners, Ottoman courts continued to rely on confessions, witness testimony, and neighborhood gossip, underscoring the uneven modernization of forensic practices [42].

Mercury Compounds (Aksülümen): Among the documented cases, Hatice (1277) and Hüsna (1259) attempted to poison their husbands using aksülümen (corrosive sublimate; mercuric chloride), a mercury chloride compound widely employed in Ottoman

medicine for treating syphilis and skin diseases, as well as a disinfectant [13]. This dual function reflects the medicalization of toxicity, where substances with therapeutic legitimacy became tools of homicide when diverted from their prescribed use. The integration of such substances into domestic medical practice provided women with both knowledge and opportunity, especially in marital disputes. However, legal responses remained inconsistent: Hatice's case resulted in imprisonment, while other poisoners faced fines or eventual release, suggesting that courts were hesitant to impose severe penalties without unequivocal toxicological evidence. The sale of such potent poisons was only restricted in the nineteenth century, and those who sold them were punished. For example, in Vidin, a Jewish peddler named Peto from the Yeni Mahalle neighborhood of Çelbun took poison and died from its effects. According to Article 196 of the law, Çelpun was sentenced to a fine of five mecidiye and imprisonment for one year [25].

Plant-Based Poisons: The most frequently cited poisons in the twenty cases were plant-based toxins, particularly sıçan otu, used by women such as Miladno, Ümmügülsüm, Katinko, Fatma and Emine against their husbands. This herb, commonly associated with rodent control, was easily obtainable through local vendors or itinerant peddlers. Its popularity among female poisoners is significant: it underscores a gendered pattern where women, lacking access to weapons and constrained within patriarchal domestic spheres, turned to substances embedded in the household economy. Unlike arsenic or mercury, which demanded some degree of specialized procurement, sıçan otu exemplified the everyday availability of lethal agents, further reinforcing judicial anxieties over poison as a "hidden" crime.

Kocacık's study, covering Istanbul, revealed that aconitum variegatum (wolfsbane), conicum maculatum (poison hemlock), camphor, and rat's rue (arsenic trioxide), used for its green color, caused poisonings. In some cases, the poisons of unidentified animals have killed people [13]. Furthermore, the official gazette of Takvim-i Vakayi provides enlightening information on whether mushrooms are poisonous [43]. All cases were proven through confessions or witnesses. Indeed, in the traditional era, plaintiffs who could not prove their claims were disbarred from court [44].

Poisoning was a crime that was easy to conceal and difficult to prove, and it appeared in different forms. Pre-modern poisoning cases were caused by plants or food, rather than chemical or mineral compounds. For example, in a case involving cheese with poison in Konya, the plaintiff was disbarred because he could not prove his claim [45]. Another person claimed that his brother was poisoned with witch hazel by people from the same village during a campaign in 1706, but he could not prove his claim [46]. In another poisoning case, the poison was administered mixed with boza, and the victim recovered within four or five hours. No information was provided about the nature of the poison [47]. Mustafa, Abdulmuin, Abdullah, and Hacı Mustafa also filed a complaint, claiming that his father had been poisoned during the journey. The defendants in the incident, which took place in Konya in 1726, denied their guilt, and the court requested Mustafa to present evidence. Plaintiff Mustafa was barred from filing a new lawsuit after failing to provide evidence [48]. Accidental poisonings are another matter reflected in court records. A child unknowingly ate sıçan otu and died as a result. The family subsequently testified in court that the villagers were not involved [49]. Other poisonous plants include Atropa belladonna (güzelavrat otu), Lachryma papaveris (afyon), and Cannabis sativa (esrar) [13]. Women and children died from overdosing. In the Ottoman Empire, women were seen as playing a role in the fermentation processes and alcohol production. Women who produced alcohol in the neighborhood, failed to pay taxes, and were implicated in alcohol poisoning were expelled from the neighborhood [50].

Opium and Accidental Poisoning: Although less prominent in intentional homicide cases, opium (afyon) was a ubiquitous household drug for pain relief, cough, and diarrhea. Its soothing properties made it indispensable in Ottoman domestic medicine, but also rendered it a source of accidental overdoses and suicides, particularly among women and children. While the current dataset does not feature opium-related murders, archival evidence and medical treatises from the era highlight its dual role as remedy and risk—again illustrating the porous boundary between therapy and toxicity [51]. Şerife Hanım, a resident of the Kadıasker neighborhood in Konya, claimed that her ex-husband Ahmet Efendi had poisoned her young son, Seyyid Mehmet, to death with opium. Hüseyin Ağa, appointed by the governor, was tasked with conducting an investigation. Hüseyin Ağa examined the child and determined there were no wounds, bruises, or traces of opium. This was confirmed by witnesses [52].

Lead and Copper Poisoning: Another substance that indirectly contributes to poisoning cases is kitchen utensils used for cooking. When pots were untinned, copper leached into food and poisoned people. Warnings were issued to this effect. Similarly, information was provided that untinned copper pots were toxic and that tinning was essential for health. It was used in pipes and cosmetics. Its use in drinking water pipes posed a public health threat and gradually led to illness. Lead poisoning also encompassed environmental and medical issues. Lead was widely found in plumbing, paint, varnish, and cosmetics, and was also implicated in food fraud practices. Unlike the acute lethal effects of arsenic or cyanide, lead has a cumulative toxic effect, manifesting as symptoms such as anemia, abdominal pain, neuropathy, and cognitive decline. While less frequently used as an intentional poison, its insidious public health consequences make it a paradigmatic example of chronic industrial toxicity [53].

Legal and Cultural Implications

The reliance on substances already circulating in Ottoman homes and markets shaped judicial perceptions of poisoning as a domestically

gendered crime. In the analyzed cases, fifteen out of twenty poisoners were women, typically targeting husbands or male relatives, with motives likely rooted in marital discord or household tensions. Punishments ranged from six months with fines to fifteen years of imprisonment, and execution though acquittals and sentence reductions were common, often justified by evidentiary gaps. Unlike in Europe, where the professionalization of toxicology facilitated harsher and more standardized penalties, Ottoman adjudication retained a hybrid model, blending modern forensic aspirations with traditional reliance on testimony and confession [54]. As in traditional medicine, diseases with unknown causes are described as poisons. For example, cholera is defined as cholera poison [55].

Ultimately, the prominence of plant-based poisons such as sıçan otu, alongside medically sanctioned compounds like aksülümen, demonstrates how Ottoman women negotiated structural constraints through the covert, feminized violence of poisoning. This pattern, reinforced by the cultural imagination that associated women with secrecy and deceit, made poison both a material and symbolic instrument of domestic agency. Even if poisoning ultimately results in death, the timing of the poisoning is important. For example, a woman who poisoned her husband during Ramadan received the death penalty, not imprisonment [56].

In the Ottoman legal-medical context, poison cases were adjudicated through a complex interplay of witness testimony, confessions, and later forensic verification. While early rulings—particularly those shaped by Ebussuud Efendi—focused on the manner of poison ingestion, the underlying principle distinguished between voluntary and forced consumption. If the victim knowingly drank the poison without coercion, the act was considered suicide, exempting the perpetrator from qisās (death penalty) but allowing for taʿzīr (discretionary punishment). In this respect, discretionary punishment refers to punishments for petit crimes and dealt with the local authorities. Conversely, forced administration warranted diyāt [57]. In cases where the poison was administered by the victim's own hand at the suggestion of another, jurists like Ebussuud emphasized the victim's agency. A striking example appears in a fatwa where a woman, fearing accusations of adultery due to an unfulfilled conditional divorce, was permitted to poison her husband under specific circumstances, reflecting the nuanced application of law to safeguard female honor. However, the evidentiary process often faced obstacles: the absence of witnesses and the frequent inability to determine cause of death rendered many poisonings invisible to the courts. Despite these challenges, arsenic emerged as the most frequently used poison, partly because it was tasteless and difficult to detect [43]. By the the nineteenth century, legal manuals and periodicals such as Ceride-i Mehakim stressed the necessity of medical examinations alongside confessions, noting that mere self-incrimination during interrogation was insufficient without confirming the poison's type, effect, and pathological evidence [58]. This transition from reliance on oral testimony to the inclusion of medical expertise marks a gradual yet significant modernization in Ottoman approaches to criminal justice and toxicology.

Limitation of the Research

Reliance on Legal and Official Sources: Most of the analysis depends on sicil records, fatwas, and legal manuals such as Ceride-i Mehakim. These reflect normative frameworks rather than the full social reality. Court cases represent only incidents that reached the judicial system, leaving informal or unreported poisonings invisible.

Gendered Assumptions: While the study emphasizes women's association with poisoning, this perspective is drawn largely from legal and cultural discourse. It may reinforce stereotypes without sufficiently exploring whether this perception aligns with actual patterns.

Limited Medical-Forensic Evidence: For earlier periods, the lack of systematic forensic data constrains conclusions about how poisoning was detected or proven. Reliance on confessions and testimony in early cases may skew the understanding of the real prevalence and methods of poisoning. The cases presented all remain in need of definitive proof [59].

Conclusion

In conclusion, poisons occupied a pivotal role in the legal and medical culture of the the nineteenth-century Ottoman Empire, shaping both everyday life and the administration of justice. Far from being confined to clandestine homicides, toxic substances circulated through domestic spaces in the form of medicines, cosmetics, dyes, and pest-control agents, blurring the line between healing and harm. Within this domestic sphere, often under the management of women poisons like arsenic and opium became instruments of both care and lethal conflict, as reflected in recurring court cases involving marital discord and illicit relationships. Legal rulings, particularly those influenced by Ebussuud Efendi, illustrate how Ottoman jurisprudence navigated moral and procedural complexities, distinguishing between voluntary and coerced ingestion and assigning punishments ranging from taʿzīr to diyya. Initially, courts relied heavily on witness testimony and confessions, but the frequent absence of witnesses and the difficulty of establishing cause of death rendered many cases invisible. By the late the nineteenth century, however, legal manuals and journals such as Ceride-i Mehakim reveal a shift toward medical verification, chemical analysis, and the integration of European toxicological expertise. This gradual modernization underscores the Empire's engagement with global forensic and public health advancements, while highlighting the persistent entanglement of law, medicine, and domestic life. The history of poison in the Ottoman world thus illuminates a broader narrative of continuity and change where private spaces intersected with public justice, and where local legal traditions adapted to

emerging scientific paradigms.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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