

The Politics of Decline: History, Gender, and Moral Decay in *Sultan Hamid Düşerken*

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Introduction

Nahid Sırrı Örik's *Sultan Hamid Düşerken*, first published in 1947, is a historical novel set in one of the most politically unstable moments of the late Ottoman Empire. Örik, a twentieth-century Turkish novelist, portrays the shift from Abdülhamid II's autocratic rule to the constitutional and revolutionary climate shaped by the Young Turks and the Committee of Union and Progress. The novel does not treat this period as a simple record of political events. Instead, it approaches history through private lives, family strategies, social ambition, and moral compromise. In this sense, *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* gives a compact but layered picture of how regime change reshapes not only institutions, but also personal relationships and social identities. This paper, however, does not aim to provide a purely literary analysis of the novel. Instead, it uses the novel as an entry point into posing personal reflections, concerning questions about historiography and the ways in which the novel may illuminate the moral and social textures of the period.

Summary of the Novel

The novel opens with the proclamation of the Second Constitutional Era in 1908 and follows the political and social unrest that leads to the 31 March Incident in 1909 and, eventually, to the deposition of Sultan Abdülhamid II. Although the title draws attention to Abdülhamid's fall, the novel presents this fall as more than a political event (Örik, 2026). It also becomes the symbolic collapse of an older social and bureaucratic order. For this reason, the narrative is not an encyclopedic reconstruction of constitutional history. It is closer to a dramatic and sociological panorama of a society in transition. It shows how individuals, families, and political circles try to survive in a period when established hierarchies begin to break down and new actors, especially those linked to the Committee of Union and Progress, gain power.

At the center of the novel are three major figures: Mehmet Şahabettin Paşa, his daughter Nimet, and Şefik Bey. Mehmet Şahabettin Paşa represents the old imperial elite. He has held important administrative posts and belongs to the world of high-ranking Ottoman officials. Yet he is not shown as an especially capable or visionary statesman. Instead, he appears as a man whose position depends on a political order that is already in decline. As the constitutional regime changes the balance of power, his household also starts to lose its stability. In this sense, the novel presents not only the fall of a ruler, but also the gradual collapse of an entire social world tied to the ancien régime.

Nimet Hanım becomes the key figure through whom this social decline is managed. She is beautiful, intelligent, and highly strategic, but she is also deeply manipulative. Her marriage is not treated simply as a matter of romance. It works as a calculated response to her family's loss of influence. In this way, the plot recalls a reversed version of the social-climbing marriage strategies found in nineteenth-century realist fiction. Here, marriage is not mainly a path to upward mobility. It is a way to avoid downward mobility and protect a status that is falling apart. Nimet understands the new political climate more clearly than many of the men around her. She turns charm, seduction, and emotional control into tools of survival. Her character therefore holds a symbolic place in the novel, as a kind of femme fatale whose personal relationships cannot be separated from wider struggles over power and social position.

Şefik Bey, the third central character, belongs to the emerging political order. As an officer connected to the Committee of Union and Progress, he represents the new forces that gain

influence after 1908. His relationship with Nimet is encouraged because it gives Mehmet Şahabettin Paşa's household a possible link to the new regime. Yet Şefik does not remain fully in control of this relationship. Over time, Nimet's influence reshapes his decisions, loyalties, and social ties. He becomes so drawn into her world that he moves away from his former companions. He even reaches the point of excluding his own mother and sister from the wedding, partly because their presence would not be seen as socially suitable. This detail matters because it shows that the marriage demands more than a political compromise. It also requires a symbolic rejection of Şefik's origins and earlier bonds.

Through these connected relationships, the novel presents the transition from one regime to another as a morally compromised process. Abdülhamid's fall is therefore only one layer of a wider story about decay, opportunism, and adaptation. The old elite tries to survive by bargaining with the new order, while the new political actors are also pulled into ambition, vanity, and corruption. The world of the novel is filled with calculation, bribery, social performance, resentment, and anxious self-preservation. This atmosphere of moral illness is what gives the narrative much of its force. Almost every character must find a way to move through the "plague" of a collapsing order, and each one does so by revealing something about his or her own desires, weaknesses, and capacity for compromise.

Reflections on Örik's Approach and Literary Camp

The novel's perspective may be read through a gendered language of decline, authority, and political transformation. Örik does not simply describe the fall of Abdülhamid II as the replacement of one political regime by another; In a personal reflection, he also stages this transition as a crisis of "masculine authority". In the world of the novel, state power, bureaucratic rank, paternal control, and social prestige are closely connected (Örik, 2026). Mehmet Şahabettin Paşa's weakening position therefore signals more than the decline of one individual household. It suggests the loss of an older form of patriarchal and imperial authority, in which being a statesman, a father, and a man of rank were imagined as mutually reinforcing positions.

This gendered dimension should not be reduced to speculation about the author's biography.¹ Rather, it can be examined within the structure of the novel itself. The narrative repeatedly

¹ What mentioned here is the speculations about Örik's sexual orientation (Gırlangıç, 2019).

associates political instability with the weakening of male authority and the growing power of indirect, domestic, and manipulative forms of influence. Nimet Hanım is central to this pattern. She is not represented as a passive woman caught in political change, but as an active strategist who reads the new order more successfully than the men around her. Her beauty, intelligence, and capacity for emotional manipulation become political instruments. In this sense, the novel seems to transform the “woman question” into a broader question of power: as older masculine institutions lose their certainty, influence moves into more ambiguous, intimate, and morally unstable spaces.

This perspective also connects the novel to a longer Ottoman-Turkish literary tradition, where modernization is often narrated through anxiety, loss, imitation, and moral weakening. The late Ottoman transformation is not presented as a simple story of progress. Instead, constitutionalism, bureaucracy, parliamentary negotiation, and the social life of political societies all belong to a new world in which authority is fragmented and constantly negotiated. The *good ol’* imperial image of command gives way to negotiation, performance, alliance-making, and opportunism. What looks like political modernization is therefore also represented as a softening or dispersal of power. The novel’s treatment of masculinity and femininity can be read through this tension. The older order imagines itself through firmness, hierarchy, and command, while the new order emerges through compromise, seduction, calculation, and uncertainty.

A useful way to frame this dynamic is to see the novel as constructing political identity through contrast. The old regime, the new constitutional order, men, women, fathers, daughters, soldiers, and bureaucrats all define themselves against one another. In this sense, the novel works through a kind of *schismogenetic*² logic: identities become sharper through opposition³. Nimet’s femininity is meaningful not merely because she is a woman, but because her form of power exposes the fragility of the men around her. Şefik Bey’s masculinity, for instance, is compromised not because he lacks official power, but because he becomes increasingly detached from his former loyalties and absorbed into Nimet’s strategy.

² Schismogenesis is a socio-anthropological concept developed by Gregory Bateson (1935) to describe the process of differentiation in the norms of individual or group behavior resulting from cumulative interaction.

³ Aside from a gendered logic or cleavage, such “schismogenetical” opposition is reiterated in the novel as in how the former influentials and bureaucrats of the Hamidian regime denote the CUP members as “countrymen” (*taşralı*).

Mehmet Şahabettin Paşa's paternal authority is likewise undermined because he depends on his daughter's marriage as a means of preserving what remains of his status.

This gendered reading of decline can also be connected to older Ottoman modes of political legitimation. In his discussion of the Ottoman civil war after the Battle of Ankara, Dimitris Kastritsis shows how narratives about Mehmed Çelebi's legitimacy do not rely only on formal succession, age, or dynastic seniority, but also on a language of personal superiority and sovereign fortune. In this context, the term *devlet* should not be reduced to the modern meaning of "state"; it also evokes fortune, divine favor, charisma, and the capacity to rule (Kastritsis, 2007). This older vocabulary allows sovereignty to appear as a masculine quality of decisiveness, composure, action, and command. The ruler is imagined not merely as a holder of office, but as a figure capable of embodying order itself. Against this background, the late Ottoman world represented in *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* appears as a world in which this older image of firm, centralized, and personal authority has already become fragile.

The novel's anxiety about feminine influence can also be understood within a longer Ottoman historiographical trope, where women's involvement in politics is often presented as a sign of disorder. Figures such as Hürrem Sultan, Kösem Sultan, and powerful valide sultans have frequently been remembered through stories of manipulation, palace intrigue, and interference in affairs of state. Yet Leslie Peirce's work is important because it directly challenges this moralizing view. Instead of treating female political power as an illegitimate intrusion into an otherwise masculine state, Peirce argues that women's authority in the imperial harem was connected to the structure of dynastic sovereignty itself (Peirce, 1993, p. 17). This point helps clarify the logic of Örik's novel. Nimet is not a historical valide sultan, but she activates a familiar cultural anxiety: when male authority weakens, power seems to shift into domestic, intimate, and feminized spaces. The novel both uses and exposes this anxiety, since Nimet's influence is politically effective even though it remains socially indirect.

A similar genealogy can be traced through the Tanzimat novel and its figure of the *alafranga züppe*. Characters such as Bihruz Bey in *Araba Sevdası* embody a form of Westernized masculinity marked by imitation, display, consumption, and social performance rather than discipline, rootedness, or authority. Mühürçüoğlu argues that "the alla franca dandy" emerged from Ottoman intellectuals' anxieties about Westernization and functioned as a figure through which improper or excessive modernization could be criticized (Mühürçüoğlu, 2020). Read in this longer literary tradition, *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* seems to inherit and darken the Tanzimat concern with weakened masculinity. The problem is no longer merely the comic superficiality

of the Westernized dandy, but the broader feminization and dispersal of political authority itself. Örik's novel therefore presents modernization not as a simple movement from despotism to liberty, but as a crisis in which sovereignty, masculinity, and social hierarchy lose their older coherence.

For this reason, the novel's political attitude is best understood as critical, rather than nostalgic or revolutionary. It does not idealize the old Hamidian order, but it also does not celebrate the new constitutional order as pure liberation. Instead, it presents political transition as a morally ambiguous process in which all sides become involved in compromise, ambition, and decay. This is why the "fall" in the title means more than Abdülhamid's deposition. It also refers to the fall of stable hierarchies, paternal authority, bureaucratic dignity, and the masculine self-confidence of the imperial order. Örik's perspective is therefore not simply anti-Abdülhamid or pro-constitutional. It offers a darker and more skeptical view of modernization itself: history becomes a process in which political change creates new possibilities, but also produces new forms of manipulation, corruption, and moral disorientation.

Historical Accuracy and Referencing

Since *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* is a novel rather than a scholarly historical study, it does not openly show the sources of information it uses. There are no footnotes, archival references, or clear bibliographical clues that would allow the reader to reconstruct Örik's source base with certainty. Still, the novel seems to rely less on newly discovered or innovative archival material than on a mixture of public historical memory, well-known accounts of the Second Constitutional Era, and Örik's own familiarity with the atmosphere of the late Ottoman world. Yakup Çelik's description of the novel is useful here. Örik fictionalizes major developments in recent Ottoman-Turkish history, some of which he had witnessed in childhood, and places them around a private love story that opens onto a wider panorama of the period (Çelik, 2009, p. 297). In this sense, the novel's historical knowledge appears to come not from the method of the professional historian, but from the literary transformation of memory, political rumor, social observation, and popular historical narratives.

In terms of historical accuracy, the novel is broadly reliable in its chronology and atmosphere. It begins with the political crisis around the restoration of the constitution in July 1908 and moves toward the 31 March Incident and the deposition of Abdülhamid II. This general

framework does not contradict the basic historical record. However, the novel's main strength is not that it gives a documentary account of political events. Rather, it offers a convincing picture of how political transformation may have been experienced inside households, bureaucratic circles, marriage negotiations, and personal ambitions. Gonca Kırtıl's reading is helpful in this respect: she argues that Örik's realistic approach makes it possible to understand the new type of individual produced by the social and political changes of the Second Constitutional Era (Kırtıl, 2014). The novel is therefore historically valuable not because it records every event with archival precision, but because it dramatizes the social and psychological effects of regime change.

At the same time, the novel does not fully escape stereotypes and myths. Its portrayal of Nimet may reproduce a familiar anxiety about female influence, manipulation, and the feminization of political authority. In this respect, the novel partly inherits older moralizing narratives in which political disorder is connected to domestic intrigue and the weakening of male authority. Yet the novel cannot be reduced to this stereotype, because Nimet is also one of the most intelligent and politically perceptive figures in the text. Similarly, the novel does not simply mythologize either Abdülhamid's regime or the constitutional order. It presents the old order as decaying, but it also shows the new political actors as ambitious, inexperienced, and morally compromised. For this reason, *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* can be seen as historically convincing not because it is neutral or free from literary conventions, but because it captures the ambiguity, anxiety, and opportunism of a society moving from one political order into another.

Language, Impact, and Public Reception

The reception history of *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* is rather dramatic. As Bahriye Çeri emphasizes in her preface to the Everest edition, the novel did not immediately receive the attention one might expect from a work now regarded as one of Örik's most important texts. It was first serialized in 1947 and appeared in book form only in 1957; its broader recognition came much later, especially after new editions brought the author back into circulation after his death (Çeri, 2026). This delayed reception suggests that the novel's importance was not established through immediate popularity, but through a gradual process of rediscovery by critics, writers, and publishers.

One reason for this complicated reception is Örik's language. Çeri draws attention to the long, ornate, and demanding quality of his prose, a style that could make the novel difficult for some readers while also making it precious for others (Çeri, 2026). The debate over language is closely connected to the novel's historical atmosphere. Its style is not merely decorative; it preserves the texture of a late Ottoman elite world. Çeri's description of Örik's prose as a masterful use of "*konak Turkish*" is especially helpful in this respect, because it suggests that the novel's language is part of its historical imagination rather than a simple obstacle to readability. The same tension appears in the dispute over the title. The replacement of *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* with *Abdülhamid Düşerken* in a later edition was not a neutral editorial choice, since the preference between "Sultan Hamid" and "Abdülhamid" carries different political and cultural implications. Yet Örik's original title should not be reduced to a simple political sympathy for Abdülhamid. As this paper has argued, the novel's interest lies less in partisan loyalty than in a more complex representation of collapse, transition, and moral ambiguity.

Despite its late recognition, the novel was preserved and valued by an important circle of critics and writers. Çeri's preface shows that figures such as Fethi Naci, and Behçet Kemal Çağlar, played an important role in keeping Örik's literary memory alive and in insisting on the value of *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* (Çeri, 2026). Their interest helps explain why the novel eventually acquired a more durable literary reputation. It was admired not simply because it narrated a major historical event, but because it combined historical reality with psychological depth, social observation, and stylistic distinctiveness. Its influence, therefore, may be understood as the result of delayed recognition: a novel that was initially neglected became important precisely because later readers found in it a rare combination of historical insight, moral complexity, and linguistic atmosphere.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Sultan Hamid Düşerken* is historically valuable not because it gives a neutral or documentary account of the Second Constitutional Era, but because it captures the social, moral, and psychological atmosphere of political transition. Örik turns Abdülhamid's fall into a broader reflection on the collapse of authority, the fragility of masculine and bureaucratic power, and the opportunism created by regime change. The novel's delayed reception also shows that its importance lies in its complexity. It resists simple political classification and instead offers a layered view of how history is lived, remembered, and transformed into fiction.

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