

AFRICAN SLAVES IN THE 19TH-CENTURY OTTOMAN EMPIRE

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## DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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## ABSTRACT

### African Slaves in the 19th-Century Ottoman Empire

This thesis examines the life stories of enslaved African people throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire in the light of archival and fictional texts. Orthodox historical literature on the institution of Ottoman slavery, along with contemporary public opinion regarding it, suggests that slavery in the Ottoman Empire was a benign social mechanism. Since slaves were considered to be “daughters” or “sons” of the houses they served, according to this perception, it is assumed that there were no imminent peril of abuse regarding the slaves and their lives were fairly easy in comparison to their comrades in the Americas. This study, focusing particularly on domestic and elite slaves, questions this perception and attempts to demonstrate that slavery was a harsh reality even for those who were relatively well-protected and best integrated. Additionally, by applying the bottom-up methodology to different types of sources, this thesis argues that slaves were not only subject to maltreatment but also carried the stigma of slavery even after “freedom”.

## ÖZET

### 19. Yüzyılda Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki Afrikalı Köleler

Bu tez, arşiv belgeleri ve kurgu metinlerden yola çıkarak, 19. yy'da Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda yaşayan köleleştirilmiş Afrikalı insanların hayat hikâyelerini inceliyor. Osmanlı'daki kölelik kurumuna dair anaakım literatür ve tarih çalışmaları ile günümüzde bu konu hakkında kamuyounda hakim olan yaklaşım, Osmanlı'da köleliği yumuşak bir toplumsal mekanizma olarak tanımlar. Hizmet ettikleri evlerin “kızları” ya da “oğlanları” olarak görüldükleri için, bu yaklaşıma göre Osmanlı'da kölelerin karşılaştıkları herhangi bir kötü muamele söz konusu değildir ve hatta Amerika kıtasındaki kölelerle kıyaslandığına durumları oldukça iyidir. Eviçi ve elit kölelere odaklanan bu çalışma, köleliğin nispeten iyi korunan ve entegre edilmiş olanlar için bile acımasız bir gerçeklik olduğunu göstererek, bu yaygın kanıyı sorgular. Ayrıca, farklı türden kaynaklara aşağıdan tarih yazımı yöntemiyle yaklaşan bu tez, sadece kölelerin kötü muameleye maruz kaldıklarını iddia etmekle kalmayıp, “özgürlük”ten sonra bile üzerlerinde taşıdıkları stigmatı gözler önüne sermektedir.

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*This thesis is dedicated to all the people who have suffered from slavery.*



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### 1.1 The debate on black slavery and its abolition

As a historical phenomenon, the institution of slavery has existed in almost all societies and religions in many forms. Enslavement, although transformed in some of its aspects, is still practiced in some parts of the world.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of its six centuries of existence, the Ottoman Empire exploited this institution, contributing to one of the darkest historical episodes of human civilization. At its apex, the territories of the Ottoman Empire reached in the north from east of Black Sea to the border of Austro-Hungarian Empire; and in the south, from the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Syria, Hijaz, Yemen, and across Egypt, through the coastal region of North Africa to the border of Morocco. The immensity of the empire and its long existence render an analysis of the various types of enslavement and their peculiar characteristics necessary. In other words, it is necessary to take into account the values, imperatives and social processes of the larger society at any given time and geography. In addition to its vastness and longevity, the ubiquity of Islam played an important role in shaping the experiences of the enslaved people and the structure of the institution in their own terms.

In the Ottoman society, slavery was a long-standing and deep-seated institution, which was profoundly interwoven with the local customs and traditions alongside Islamic law. For centuries, slavery had been regenerated, reorganized, and perpetuated within the religion of Islam in line with the needs of an Islamic society.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, for the revival of slavery by Islamist State, see Stein and Searcey, '21 Chibok Schoolgirls, Reuniting with Parents, Tell of Boko Haram Slavery.'

<sup>2</sup> Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery*. Mohammed Ennaji, *Slavery, The State, and*

The underlying historical conditions played a significant role in defining and shaping the duties of all the slaves, including military-administrative, domestic and agricultural slaves. Not only the origin and acquisition of slaves but also their employment forms differed across geography and time. The duties of slaves ranged from domestic service to agricultural cultivation or from maritime slave labor to service in the civil bureaucracy and military. When the Ottoman military power started to wane and the expansion towards European territories came to a halt, the so far customary practice of obtaining slaves through conquest and enslavement of defeated enemies was replaced with purchasing and importing slaves from traders. This change in the forms of attaining slaves appeared at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when the number of *kul/harem* slaves (military-administrative officeholders) declined despite the fact that some of them still continued to hold high positions until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The same century also witnessed the gradual demise of the old practice through which janissaries were forcibly enslaved and recruited at a very young age, mainly from the Balkans. Agricultural slavery also went through some changes; it was almost abandoned in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but as far as we know it re-emerged for a short period of time in two regions: in Ottoman Egypt in the sector of cotton cultivation in the 1860s and in different parts of Anatolia as a result of the Russian-directed ethnic cleansing from 1860s onwards.<sup>3</sup>

Hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans, Circassians, Georgians, Russians and Greeks were brought to Ottoman lands as slaves through a complex network of routes over land and sea.<sup>4</sup> However, the demand for slaves in the empire

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*Islam.*

<sup>3</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, 43-62. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, 81-112.

<sup>4</sup> Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression*, 14-48.

were met throughout the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century from two main sources: an overwhelming majority of slaves were brought from different parts of Africa, and the second largest group came from the Caucasus. The first group consisted mostly of female slaves intended for domestic service and menial tasks in the elite households. This thesis focuses particularly on these two groups of slaves, not touching the issue of slave labor in agriculture or artisanal activity.

As Atlantic slave trade started to decline, especially after the 1807 Slave Trade Act, the trade in enslaved Africans shifted to the Middle Eastern and North African markets. The establishment of regular steamer lines between the ports of North African and Ottoman port cities helped this increase in the volume of slave traffic. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the occupation of the Sudan by Egypt in 1820-1822 also buttressed the conditions for the increase in the volume of slave trade. According to Toledano's estimation, more than 1.3 million enslaved African women and men were brought to the Ottoman Empire throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup>

The influence of the strong abolitionist movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Britain and later in other Western countries inevitably spread to the Ottoman lands. The slave market in Istanbul was closed in 1847, but as Erdem points out this measure was not intended to end slavery in the empire, and it did not even ameliorate the lots of slaves because it made "the slave-dealers less susceptible to governmental and internal supervision."<sup>6</sup> The closure of the market was followed by a ban on the African slave trade in the Persian Gulf, which met only a very small portion of the slave demand of the Ottomans. One should also be aware of the fact that the edict was kept secret upon the request of the council of minister in Istanbul in order to

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<sup>5</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, 11.

<sup>6</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, 98.

avoid a similar demand from Russians concerning the Circassian slave trade.<sup>7</sup> An empire-wide prohibition on the fresh importation of enslaved Africans was signed in 1857 between the Ottoman Empire and Britain for the suppression of the black slave trade. This treaty was strengthened by the 1880's convention between this two powers. This agreement provided Britain with the right to search and seize slave ships in Ottoman waters such as the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf, and parts of the coast of East Africa but not in the Mediterranean. In recent scholarship, the omission of the Mediterranean is considered intentional, based on the sources indicating the involvement of European steamers in slave trade in the region.<sup>8</sup> It is noteworthy that the Iranian government took this agreement as a direct example for their politics concerning the issue of slave trade. According to Behnaz Mirzai, a translated copy of the agreement was sent to the Iranian court in order to be examined.<sup>9</sup> Contrary to the Ottoman Empire, in Iran, slavery was completely abolished and the emancipation of slaves took place in 1928. During the reign of Abdülhamid II, there were at least two attempts to promulgate a special law concerning the prohibition of black slavery. The department of *Tanzimat* in the Council of State prepared two draft laws in 1882 and 1883. According to Erdem, they were “carefully prepared manifestos for the abolition of black slavery.”<sup>10</sup> However, the Sultan declined to promulgate the law in spite of his initial willingness. Almost a decade later, as noted above, the Ottomans signed the Brussels Conference Act of 1890, which resulted in the suppression of the slave trade but not of slavery itself. Erdem's remarks on the measures and their aftermath is as follows:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>8</sup> Ferguson and Toledano, ‘Ottoman Slavery and Abolition in the Nineteenth Century,’ 209. For the involvement of European steamers, see: Frank, ‘The Children of the Desert and the Laws of the Sea: Austria, Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and the Mediterranean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century,’ 412- 426; 433–4.

<sup>9</sup> Mirzai, ‘Slavery, The Abolition of The Slave Trade, And The Emancipation of Slaves in Iran (1828-1928),’ Ph.D Dissertation, 171.

<sup>10</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, 137.

The next logical step would have been the abolition of slavery itself as a legal status. This step the Ottomans had not taken neither during the reign of Abdülhamid II nor during those of his successors under the Young Turk ascendancy.<sup>11</sup>

The Ottoman Empire became one of the signatories of the General Act of the Brussels Conference of 1889-1890, which aimed to put an end to the traffic of African slaves. This act did not result in a drastic change regarding previous developments except a key addition: “that emancipating state must act to establish places of care for rescued African slaves.”<sup>12</sup> The ban on the white slave trade could only be implemented in 1909 under the reign of the Young Turks. In spite of these measures and in the absence of wholesale abolition, slavery remained a living institution until the end of the empire. After the establishment of the Turkish Republic, the old practices were replaced by new forms –though legal– such as the unofficial adoption of children (*besleme*).<sup>13</sup> In what follows I will consider the obstacles on the road to the abolition of slavery.

## 1.2 The obstacles on the road to the abolition of slavery and its present implications

The first time the British attempted to force the Ottoman government into taking actions against slavery and slave trade in the Ottoman dominions in 1840, the Foreign Secretary of Britain sent instructions to the British Ambassador, Lord Ponsonby, with the intention of understanding what the Ottomans thought about the suppression of the slave trade. His despatch is worth quoting:

I have mentioned the subject and I have been heard with extreme astonishment accompanied with a smile at a proposition for destroying an institution closely interwoven with the frame of society in this country and

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>12</sup> Ferguson and Toledano, ‘Ottoman Slavery and Abolition in the Nineteenth Century,’ 211.

<sup>13</sup> Toledano, ‘Ottoman Concepts of Slavery in the Period of Reform,’ 60. Ferhunde Özbay, ‘Evlerde el kızları: Cariyeler, evlatlıklar, gelinler,’ 13-49.



intimately connected with the law and with the habits, and the religion of all classes of the people from the Sultan himself down to the lowest peasant.<sup>14</sup>

British Ambassador, Lord Ponsonby, must have foreseen the impossibility of destroying the institution in 1840. Madaline Zilfi, drawing on the observations of other historians of Ottoman slavery, points out three mutually inclusive reasons for Ottoman resistance to abolition: “national sovereignty, cultural defence, and religious sanction.”<sup>15</sup> Recalcitrance over abolition was not only seen on the part of the sovereign and the dynasty, but also on the part of the members of *ulema* and military bureaucrats who were amongst the primary consumers of slaves. Even the progressive reformists, who were the architects of the *Tanzimat*, did not display any intention towards abandoning the practice of purchasing slaves, especially concubines. For instance, Mustafa Reşid Pasha, the architect of the *Gülhane* Rescript, kept several concubines, alongside his legal and very visible wife.<sup>16</sup> Midhat Pasha serves here as a paragon of the duality that surrounded the majority of the reformists. While presenting a draft to Sultan Abdülhamid II with the intention of persuading him to give manumission to the palace slaves, he did not refrain from giving and receiving slaves as Fuad and Ali Pashas, the other architects of the *Tanzimat*, did.<sup>17</sup> We are informed for instance that Midhat Pasha bought his second wife Şehriban, an enslaved Circassian woman, for 2000 gold coins.<sup>18</sup> The period is abundant in examples of such similar contradictions between words and deeds. In other words, while openly proclaiming distaste for the institution, the reformists did

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<sup>14</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, 73. Toledano also mentions other parts of the dispatch: ‘I think that attempts to effect your Lordship’s purpose will fail, and I fear they might give offence if urged forward with importunity. The Turks may believe us to be their superiors in the Sciences, in Arts, and in Arms, but they are far from thinking our wisdom or our morality greater than their own.’ in Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression*, 93.

<sup>15</sup> Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 219.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

<sup>17</sup> Lovejoy, ‘The Meaning of Blackness in the Life of Alhaji Mohammed Ali Sa’id.’

<sup>18</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, 132.

not refrain from being the most consistent users of slaves, especially female ones in their harems. Toledano claims that this striking contradiction displays “very real and honest inner conflict.”<sup>19</sup>

Many of the reformists developed a defensive argument by closing their eyes to the horrors of the slave trade and the practice of enslavement. They based their arguments on the fact that “whatever had happened to that slave belonged to another world- one that was uncivilized, unruly, and beyond their control.”<sup>20</sup> Their claims referencing *Şeriat*, which recommends kindness towards the enslaved and encourages manumission as a pious act, rested on the treatment of slaves in a humane fashion. The religious defence was also strengthened with the Qur’anic recognition of slavery as a social fact. Prophet Muhammed’s possession of slaves attested to the recognition of slavery vis-à-vis the treatment of slaves on humane grounds. The uprising in Hijaz helps us to understand how religion was used to defend slavery. As I have stated, the general ban of African slave trade promulgated in 1857, but it was with the exception of Hijaz province. When reports reached Hijaz pertaining to the Ottoman measures against the suppression of the slave trade in 1857, Shayk Cemal denounced the ban on slave trade as contrary to the holy law of Islam by issuing a decree. The *fetva* reads as follows:

The Turks have become renegades. It is obligatory to make war against them and against those who follow them. Those who are with us are for heaven and those who are with them are for hell. Their blood is lawful and their goods are licit.<sup>21</sup>

While the Shayk’s objection to the ban was in part a tactic aimed at preserving his own authority, it was framed in terms that were likely to elicit a deeper reaction in his audience. However, one should approach with due caution in order not to fall into

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<sup>19</sup> Toledano, ‘Late Ottoman concepts of slavery (1830-1880),’ 493.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 494.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, An Historical Enquiry*, 81.

the common pitfall of ascribing a unique Islamic character to Ottoman slavery, and must count the importance of other factors such culture, local issues, traditions. For instance, according to Cronin, “cross the both Middle East and North Africa, the relative weakness of the abolitionist sentiment can be best explained not by the power of Islamic discourse but by the structures of slavery in the region and especially the specific forms of agency to which those structures gave rise.”<sup>22</sup>

In a recent study, based on a careful reading of archival documents during the second constitutional period of 1908, Ceyda Karamürsel testifies to the final failure of the emancipatory efforts on part of the reformist-minded Ottomans. Karamürsel examines a proposal concerning the emancipation of existing slaves submitted by Yorgo Boşo Efendi, a deputy from Serfice (today’s Sarvia, Greece). It was rejected “by the majority of parliamentarians, most of whom believed that slavery no longer existed in the Ottoman Empire, and if it did, it was merely due to a violation of the penal or *Şer’i* law.”<sup>23</sup>

The absence of an emancipation law in the empire has an important implication in our understanding of slavery. As discussed above, the abolition of slavery vis-à-vis the full emancipation of enslaved people never succeeded in the Ottoman society. As Hakan Erdem points out, cases for manumission had to be individually decided by *Şer’i* law courts<sup>24</sup> rather than being provided by a general law. Here we should stress the difference between two terms: manumission and emancipation. They are incorrectly used interchangeably. Even though both terms refer to granting of freedom to individuals, there is an important difference between the implications of the two terms and in my view it is problematic to use

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<sup>22</sup> Cronin, ‘Islam, Slave Agency and Abolitionism in Iran, the Middle East and North Africa,’ 954.

<sup>23</sup> Karamürsel, ‘The Uncertainties of Freedom: The Second Constitutional Era and the End of Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire,’ 154.

<sup>24</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, 151.

“manumission” and “emancipation” interchangeably, as if the two mean exactly the same thing. The former provides enslaved people with freedom through slave holders’ wills and it is arbitrary in that sense; the latter ensures a universal granted freedom for all enslaved people under the protection of the law without the need of the owners’ consent. For this very reason, throughout the thesis I abstain from using the term emancipation unless I refer to a wholesale freedom of all enslaved people granted by a decree or law.<sup>25</sup> We should also note that manumission created a different form of a dependency relationship called *velâ* between the enslaved and the slave holder. In other words, manumission did not ensure the abolition of the master-slave relationship. Manumitted slaves stayed connected to their former slaveholders, which posited some limitation in the lives of freed individuals. For instance, this patronage gave former slaveholders a right to be heirs of their freed slaves’ inheritance. According to Mahir Şaul, slavery must have been banned together with other types of servitude in order to fulfil the conditions of the philosophical foundation of the abolition, which is based on the equality of all the people. This did not happen and the uncertainty of life continued in the lives of enslaved people and in return, this paved the way for different forms of servitude, such as *beslemelik*, which I have mentioned above. These adopted children, who were given the duties of domestic servants in the households, had to endure forms of domestic dependency hardly distinguished from past slavery. This situation reified the vulnerability of freed people especially the youths of freed Africans, who became the biggest target group of the perpetrators who were resolved to re-enslave them.

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<sup>25</sup> I would like to thank Mahir Şaul for attracting my attention to this issue. See also: Şaul, ‘Geçmişten Bugüne Siyah Afrika’dan Türkiye’ye Göçler: Kölelikten Küresel Girişimciliğe,’ 75-119.

Even today, the repercussion of the institution of Ottoman slavery is felt by the Afro-Turks who are citizens of the Republic of Turkey. In the past few decades, a wide range of studies on slavery in the Ottoman Empire have demonstrated that at least 1.3 million Africans were forcefully transported to the empire during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to Toledano, scattered data and reasonable extrapolations regarding the volume of the slave trade from Africa to the Ottoman Empire yield an estimated 16,000 to 18,000 men and women who were dislocated and sold into slavery in the empire each year during much of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>26</sup> The descendants of these slaves, according to the fieldwork conducted by Mustafa Olpak adds up to between 20,000 and 25,000. Esma Durugönül explains the reason why it is difficult to give exact numbers as to the Afro/Turks living in the Republic. Both in the Ottoman era as well as in the Republican era, Africans were considered Turks/Muslims. As a consequence, Afro-Turks are virtually statistically non-existent in the official demographic records of the Ottoman and Republican eras of Turkish history.<sup>27</sup> According to her, one of the main reasons for the neglect of people of African origin who lived in the Ottoman Empire and who still live in today's Turkey is due to the lack of scholarly work on the past or the present situation of this group in Turkey. Since she wrote her article in 2003, a considerable number of researchers have focused their attention on various aspects of Ottoman enslavement and struggles of Afro-Turks.<sup>28</sup> Although I agree with Durugönül's observation that the invisibility of

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<sup>26</sup> Toledano bases his assumption on works by Ralph Austen, and the numbers cited above are from 'The 19th Century Islamic Slave Trade from East Africa (Swahili and Red Sea Coasts): A Tentative Census,' 271-308, and 'The Mediterranean Islamic Slave Trade Out of Africa: A Tentative Census,' 214-248. See also Rick's consideration in 'Slaves and Slave Traders in the Persian Gulf, 18th and 19th Centuries: An Assessment,' 60-70. For Lovejoy's higher numbers and criticism of Austen's figures, see Lovejoy, 'Commercial Sectors in the Economy of the Nineteenth-Century Central Sudan: The Trans-Saharan Trade and the Desert-Side Salt Trade,' 87-95; see also Lovejoy (ed), *Transformation in Slavery: A history of Slavery in Africa*.

<sup>27</sup> Durugönül, 'The Invisibility of Turks of African Origin and the Construction of Turkish Cultural Identity: The Need for A New Historiography,' 282.

<sup>28</sup> See literature survey of the thesis.

Turks of African origin in Turkey derives from the scholarly neglect, I also want to add that this neglect was consolidated by the way history has been taught in Turkish schools. Unfortunately, school curriculums for history do not even spare a page for the narration of slavery in the Ottoman Empire. Worse than that, many people deny the existence of slavery in the Ottoman society. With this aporia inherent in the Turkish educational system, it is very difficult to be aware of the diversities and differences both in the Turkish Republic and the Ottoman Empire. First of all, we need to come to terms with what one can call the dark sides of both the Ottoman and Republican history.

This silence in scholarship and official history, have dire implications for the Afro/Turks living in Turkey. For instance, they face open expressions of racism since the perpetrators consider them different because of their skin color. The narratives of Afro-Turks provide valuable testimonies to the continuing impact of historical enslavement and present day discrimination. It is necessary to give some examples and comments from Afro-Turks on how they feel about not being acknowledged by their fellow citizens in order to show what impact this lack of historical acknowledgment has left on their lives. In the interview which I conducted with Fersa Pulhan Acar who was married to the late Kuzgun Acar, a well-known sculptor of Turkey, she shared an anecdote of her husband: Kuzgun Acar, who had his black complexion from his mother's side, one day went out to meet a friend in Taksim Square. Against his friend's protests he took his suitcase with a sarcastic remark: "Let me do my race's business, this is our staff. We were slaves and this is my business." According to Fersa Acar, he had the grandness to make fun of his slavery past.<sup>29</sup> However, not everyone is capable of dealing with this past as Kuzgun Acar

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<sup>29</sup> (Fersa Pulhan Acar, personal communication, March 5, 2014).

did. Behiye Palalı, for example, comments on her own life by saying that “slavery is over, but its disgrace continues for me and my three children.”<sup>30</sup> Palalı’s harrowing comments reminds me the words of Stephanie Cronin: “the condition of slavery was indelibly and essentially connected to blackness. They invariably occupied the most degraded and highly stigmatized social positions, and both they and their children could expect to die.”<sup>31</sup>

### 1.3 Aim of the thesis

The institution of slavery was integral to the Ottoman society and local community life, so demand for slaves never ceased, but types of slavery and slaves experiences varied greatly. That said, most slaves were not destined for an easy life; many of them, especially right after their manumission, were lone and homeless (*bi-kes* and *bi-mekân*) as well as helpless and destitute (*‘âciz* and *bi-vâye*). To take an example, on 10 April 1887, in his dispatch to the municipality of Istanbul, (*şehremâneti*), a scribe told the story of an enslaved African woman, Mecbure, who was one of the alone and homeless (*bî-kes ve bî-mekân takımından*).<sup>32</sup> Mecbure had applied to the police officer, *zâbita*, to find a solution to her eye disease after her treatment had been rejected by the Haseki Women’s Hospital. Thereupon the scribe wrote a dispatch to the *şehremâneti* to remind them of their duties, which included providing food and security for those who were helpless and destitute (*‘âciz ve bî-vâye*).

Adjectives used to describe the situation of Mecbure tells us a lot about what was awaiting the enslaved people when they get older and “useless” in terms of labor. They ended up being *bî-kes*, *bî-mekân*, *‘âciz* and *bî-vâye*. This thesis, written in

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<sup>30</sup> ‘Siyahım Afrikalıyım Türküm.’

<sup>31</sup> Cronin, ‘Islam, Slave Agency and Abolitionism in Iran, the Middle East and North Africa,’ 955.

<sup>32</sup> BOA.DH. MKT.1421/68. I thank Zeynep Gürsel for drawing my attention to the document.

the light of archival and textual documents, focuses on some fragments of the lives of enslaved African people particularly those who were passably well protected and best integrated. It is not meant as a definitive study of black slavery in the Ottoman Empire, given that it employs domestic and elite slaves and excludes slaves in the sectors of agriculture and artisanal activity. It draws on a shift in historical inquiry, which led to bottom-up perspective that has been developed by recent literature and its modest aim is to enable the reader to understand the predicament of slavery, which has so long been silenced and suppressed in documented history. It, therefore, endeavours to shed light on the lives of these otherwise silenced, marginalized and enslaved people. The thesis does not simply aim to reassert that slavery was a very harsh reality, but tries to point out how the lives of people were shaped by the institution of slavery not only during bondage but also after the so-called freedom. The enslaved people in the cases I have brought to light lived in the same households with their masters or mistresses and despite of some exceptions, were not deprived of food and care. So they did not suffer from the plight of homelessness or have to work in plantations as their comrades in the Americas. But the recorded narratives point out the fact that they had to face the plight of slavery even in the face of what apologists might have called “relative comfort zones.” As will be seen from what follows, the chapters reveal some facets of enslaved Africans’ life stories documenting abuse and mistreatment. The reality of slavery in their own stories was certainly characterised by ill-treatment. Even if there was no clear abuse in this picture, the cases show enslaved people’s desires to live outside of bondage. The cases also demonstrate that the transition from slavery to freedom was not an easy process and even if the passage was realized, this “freedom” meant some other kind of dependency, especially for women who ended up in the custody of others. If they



did not end up in custody, they would probably end up alone, homeless, helpless and destitute like Mecbure. (*bî-kes, bî-mekân, ‘âciz ve bi-vâye*)

In the orthodox historical narrative, Ottoman slave system has been widely depicted in lenient terms, ignoring the suffering of the slaves. This argument has been based on a demonstration of how Islamic or Middle Eastern slavery was better or more enlightened compared to the American slave system. An enthusiastic apology for slavery has outweighed the way with which the topic has been dealt critically. Although scholarly knowledge and unstinting efforts in many ways lightened the labor of both research and writing, it has also proved that “old attitudes die hard.” Apologetic and polemical debate over the history of Ottoman enslavement along with defensive attitude in Islamic societies is “at least a century and a half old.”<sup>33</sup> Refutation of the apologist argument on the other hand suffer from the same pitfalls as Frederic Cooper claims:

Both the apologies and their refutation have the same flaw: the vain search of for a universal essence of Islamic slavery or society, a quest that puts a more of a burden on the significance of religion than can it possibly bear.<sup>34</sup>

According to Shaun Marmon, anyone who undertakes the study of slavery in the Ottoman Empire, disregarding the studied time and geography, needs to confront the dilemma of the role of Islamic law, *Şeriat*. Islamic law provided a powerful and highly articulated paradigm for slavery, manumission, and clientage, although individuals and communities negotiated, interpreted, and at times blatantly violated the principle of *Şeriat*.<sup>35</sup> We should keep in mind that the pervasiveness of Islam in Ottoman society makes it difficult to understand enslavement outside of the religious

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<sup>33</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Cooper, ‘Islam and Cultural Hegemony,’ 250.

<sup>35</sup> Marmon (ed.), *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, vii.

framework, but it is *one* of the important parameters for understanding of slavery.

For instance, it would not be wrong to assume that slavery could not last a year if the consumers once expressed a steady abolitionist reaction against it.

Some peculiarities of slavery in Islam like elite slavery and manumission have paved the way for an impression that there was a milder form of slavery in the Ottoman Empire. Recent scholarship has challenged what Zilfi calls the “benevolent stewardship” or what Toledano prefers to call “the good treatment thesis.” Zilfi emphasizes that regardless of the possible kind treatment that domestic slaves may or may not have received, the ills of the institution as a whole far outweighed any mitigating aspects.<sup>36</sup> And she clearly states that slaves might be loved and nurtured as sons or daughters but they remained as commodities of exchange.<sup>37</sup> Toledano, as an important scholar who has devoted a significant part of his scholarly career to the study of Ottoman enslavement, writes:

Slavery in these societies was believed to have been milder, better integrated; more open to inclusion, hence its abolition occurred late and never constituted a major political issue. However, perceptions have been changing over the past two decades or so, on the whole becoming more critical, less accepting, perhaps less prepared to tolerate the broader implications of what we may call the good-treatment thesis.<sup>38</sup>

Mohammed Ennaji in his study on slavery of 19<sup>th</sup> century Morocco demonstrates that to be a slave in this specific part of the Muslim society was, typically, not pleasant and the slavery portrayed in his study is neither benign nor ameliorative.<sup>39</sup> With the shift in the historiography from top to bottom approach to a history from below approach, historians are able to write an alternative history from the perspective of the slaves. The most important problem associated with history from below approach

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<sup>36</sup> Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 125.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>38</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, 17.

<sup>39</sup> Ennaji, *Serving the Master: Slavery and Society in Nineteenth-Century Morocco*, 5-15.

is the nature and availability of sources. Slaves did not leave many records of their own. Interrogation records can reveal some information on the lives of slaves but they still stay silent on the traumas visited upon enslaved people. On the other hand, fictional texts can compensate for the paucity of these sources, as we shall see in the following chapters.

Having said all these things, in order to trace the personal stories of enslaved Africans, this thesis has benefited from archival and fictional documents in the firm belief that they can fill each other's gaps. Between these archival and fictional sources, the memoir of a black eunuch provided in depth information on the subjects ranging from the homeland of enslaved Africans before slavery to the voyage to Ottoman lands. In order not to cross generic boundaries by blending fiction and historical fact in the same chapter, I have organized each chapter according to the type of sources. The first chapter after literature review is based on court records, in the next chapters a memoir and a novel are used respectively. This approach has both positive as well as some negative aspects. On the positive side, each chapter can be read as a different article that underlines the importance of each source in our understanding of Ottoman slavery. On the other hand, readers may find it hard to jump from archival sources to fictional ones. In order to avoid confusion, each chapter will provide methodological foundations at the beginning in order to be as clear as possible and to remind the reader that this thesis first of all aims to contribute to the recent discussion regarding the supposedly kinder, gentler world of slavery in the Ottoman Empire in the light of different sources. Rather than being time and space-oriented, sources are selected from different places and time periods – namely from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and slightly extending to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This less specific mode of use could be counted as a pitfall, but on the other

hand it opens a way for comparing the experiences of enslaved people and practice of enslavement in an overall sense.

Having stated a short summary of Ottoman slavery, and of the concerns and debates regarding black slavery vis-à-vis its abolition, a literature survey of Ottoman slavery studies will be given in terms of a shift in historical inquiry. Drawing upon archival documents, especially court records, the second chapter will examine the life stories of household slaves who tried to end their enslavement employing different strategies. The chapter sheds light on how enslaved people made use of the loopholes of the system, sometimes by bargaining within its confines or sometimes by challenging its existence, in the hope of mitigation and ultimate release.<sup>40</sup> A close examination of four cases, each of which yields specific information on the lives of enslaved Africans, points to the fact that the slaves demanded to be free, but were prevented from this freedom either by the slaveholders or the system itself. Their predicament varied considerably from one province to other just as it altered from one master to another. The chapter also demonstrates that slaveholders did not usually abide by the Islamic law in their treatment of the slaves. Hence, the chapter once more highlights the difficulty in reconciling theory and practice. While emphasizing the narrative aspect of the sources, the thesis eschews quantitative analyses. This is not because of any belief that regards these sources as being of secondary importance, but entirely because of my inability to encompass quantitative analyses into the scope of this thesis. The density of the sources I have been able to consult is too low to permit any adequate and meaningful quantitative analysis at this point. Perhaps my approach comes closer to microhistory than to quantitative history.

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<sup>40</sup> Cronin, 'Islam, slave agency and abolitionism in Iran, the Middle East and North Africa,' 961.

In the fourth chapter, I will move from domestic slavery to another phenomenon not found in Atlantic world: elite slavery. Having defined kul/harem slavery, the chapter endeavors to bring out the similarities and reduce the perceived differences between elite and non-elite slavery. A short memoir of an African eunuch named Nadir Agha, one of the imperial eunuchs of Abdülhamid II, allows us a rare insight into the almost unknown aspects of Ottoman slavery studies. His dictated memoir traces a life story of a little boy who was kidnapped in Abyssinia, castrated and sold into slavery. His narrative also addresses his “freedom” after a long service and enables us to see that “freedom” did not change a lot or improve any social status since association of Africans and eunuchs with a former enslaved status and low social ranking stayed with them until they died. In short, his memoir displays the fact that deracination was the very essence of the eunuchs’ existence.

The last chapter builds on a novel written by an unknown author and whose book *ipso facto* was outside the canon of late Ottoman literature. *Define* (Treasury) by Ebul Akif Mehmed Efendi is a unique text in many ways. If we look closely into novels and stories of late Ottoman literature, we frequently come across enslaved Africans as secondary characters like the nanny, the cook and the housekeeper. *Define*, on the other hand, offers an extraordinary picture; it was narrated by an enslaved African woman who was also the protagonist of the novel. One can ask a legitimate question about the role of novels in our understanding of slavery. In my view, they fill crucial gaps in slave narratives by presenting stories, especially traumas that visited enslaved people, not found in history books, nor in officially constructed documents. For instance, some episodes in the novel give us insights into the representation and perception of skin color and slavery. Plus, it invites the reader

not only to peer through the microscope of the author but also to see through the eyes of the author reflecting on slavery. We are not sure to what extent the individual legal records, memoirs or literary works mirror pure reality. Even legal cases tend to include competing narratives. As will be seen throughout the chapters, these different sources complement each other in striking ways. Going back and forth among different sources, I aim to show one common denominator: contrary to popular opinion, enslaved Africans regardless of whether they belonged to elite or non-elite groups, suffered from the status of slavery in many different ways.

Marcus Rediker, author of the *Slave Ship: A Human History*, expresses a personal note in the book. For him, it was painful to write *Slave Ship*, and adds that: “If I have done any justice to the subject, it would be a painful book to read. There is no way around this, nor should there be. I offer this study with the greatest reverence for those who suffered almost unthinkable violence, terror and death, in the firm belief that we must remember that such horrors have always been, remain, central to the making of global capitalism.”<sup>41</sup> Slavery in the Ottoman Empire had no strong links with the making of global capitalism as the Atlantic slave trade did, but the point that I share with the writer is that it has been painful to write on such a sensitive topic, and may also be painful to read.

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<sup>41</sup> Rediker, *Slave Ship: A Human History*, 28.

## CHAPTER 2

### OTTOMAN SLAVERY: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Although the topic of Ottoman slavery had remained a mystery for many years, recently some scholars have addressed this phenomenon through meticulously conducted research. Our knowledge on this institution increased thanks to new research methods and immense investment of scholarly energy and inquiry into this field within the last couple of decades. While many studies contributed to fill the gaps in the field of slavery studies, many aspects of slavery in the Ottoman Empire still remain either slightly touched or unidentified as areas of inquiry. For instance, we still do not know much about the general conditions regarding the lives of the enslaved Africans after manumission, nor do we have a comprehensive historical study covering black eunuchs in the imperial harem.

In this section, I aim to discuss the research focusing on slavery in the by discussing their contributions as well as shortcomings both to slavery studies and this present work. In general, research on slavery in the Ottoman Empire concentrated first on the early centuries of the empire, particularly focusing on the socioeconomic aspects of slavery, and tackled the questions concerning the institutional aspects of slavery, especially the military and official elite slaves. The next phase of research steered the discussion towards the harem and female slavery and in so doing aimed to shed light on the issues regarding the gendered aspects of the institution, the gendered experience of slavery and the agency of enslaved women. At the same time, some researchers delved into the history of the slave trade and abolition of slavery in Muslim societies. Alongside all these developments, for the last couple of decades, Ottoman studies have witnessed a significant shift from economic history to

cultural history.<sup>42</sup> The introduction of new approaches to history writing also brought about a renewal of the subject of Ottoman slavery. As a result, the historians started to approach many stories concerning slave experiences from a bottom-up perspective, which from an interdisciplinary approach have brought together and utilized different methodologies from anthropology, literature and history.<sup>43</sup> This thesis, drawing and based on the last approach, attempts to examine different sources to unearth the voices of the enslaved people.

## 2.1 Economic aspects of slavery

The studies focus on the economic and institutional aspects of slavery and for the most part draw on the period before the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Researchers usually benefit from court registers (*Sijils*) and their works usually emerge out of a general research interest rather than a specific set of questions addressed to the institution of slavery. For instance, Alan Fisher, while tracing documents related to 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century's Crimea in the Ottoman archives of Istanbul, came across many documents regarding the subject of slavery and was surprised to see that the studies on the subject was still at an embryonic level.<sup>44</sup> Thereupon, he published his preliminary findings concerning markets and the governmental regulations concerning the sale of slaves, particularly focusing on tax regulations and judicial procedures. His study, which can be counted amongst the pioneering research in the field, underlines the pervasiveness of slave trade throughout the empire and tackles, with reference to Fernand Braudel,

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<sup>42</sup> Kırılı, 'From Economic History to Cultural History in Ottoman Studies,' 376-378

<sup>43</sup> For a well-articulated summary of this change, see Ferguson and Toledano, 'Ottoman Slavery and Abolition in the Nineteenth Century.' For the involvement of European steamers, see Frank, 'The Children of the Desert and the Laws of the Sea: Austria, Great Britain, the Ottoman Empire, and the Mediterranean Slave Trade in the Nineteenth Century,' 197-201.

<sup>44</sup> Fisher, 'The Sale of Slaves in the Ottoman Empire: Markets and the State Taxes on Slave Sales. Some Preliminary Considerations,' 149-173.



the structural features of this institution as it appears in a Mediterranean society.<sup>45</sup> In the light of the court records and accounts of estate documents, he narrates the information concerning judicial procedures, numbers of slaves, slave owners, slave labor and slave identities.<sup>46</sup>

Following Fisher's publications, in 1979, an eminent historian of Ottoman studies, Halil İnalcık, published an article on the topic. Confining his study to an earlier period, between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, he discusses the roles of slaves in different areas, such as the roles of those serving the state and military class, and working in the crafts and agricultural sectors. He argues that slavery was integral to the functioning of the Ottoman society. After raising this argument, he addresses the following question: Can Ottoman society really be defined as a slave society? In answering this question, he prefers to use the term *servile* rather than *slavery* to describe slaves in the empire since he argues that enslaved people in the empire, especially elite slaves, were different from the slaves in the Americas.<sup>47</sup> İnalcık's alternative wording to describe slavery in the Ottoman Empire is not an exception; other prominent scholars of Ottoman history have suggested alternative terms, as well. For the kul/harem class, Metin Kunt used the term *sultan's servants* for kuls whereas Suraiya Faroqhi preferred to call them *servitors*.<sup>48</sup> This attitude highlights the privileges of elite slavery in comparison to domestic and agricultural slavery by way of ignoring the free lives of the former in their homelands before being forced into slavery. As opposed to this view, present study supports an integrated position,

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<sup>45</sup> On many of the provincial law codes concerning taxes on slave sales, Fisher informs different measures among different cities like Salonika, Semendire-Belgrad, Basra, İçel, Bolu, Diyarbakir, Serim, Hatvan, Gula, Mardin, Erzincan, Damascus, İstanköy, Bosnia and Egypt. See Fisher, 'Chattel Slavery in the Ottoman Empire,' 30.

<sup>46</sup> Fisher, 'Studies in Ottoman Slavery and Slave Trade, II: Manumission,' 51.

<sup>47</sup> İnalcık, 'Servile Labor in the Ottoman Empire,' 22-55.

<sup>48</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, 21. For the works of Metin Kunt and Suraiya Faroqhi respectively see; Kunt, *The Sultan's Servants: The Transformation of Ottoman Provincial Government, 1550-1650*. Faroqhi, 'The Ruling Elite between Politics and the 'Economy',' 545-549.

that is, “all legally bonded subjects of the sultan should be treated as enslaved people for the purpose of social analysis.” Otherwise, the preference to use alternative terms could erase the predicament of the elite slaves, and thus leads to the “good treatment thesis” and “hurdle attitude” which I have discussed above. The article also shares the same mistake with other studies since it claims that the Ottoman government officially *abolished slavery of any kind in its territories*.<sup>49</sup>

Another important scholar, Suraiya Faroqhi who benefits from *tereke* registers and court records, also published articles on the topic.<sup>50</sup> During her research, she came across female slaves and freedwomen in the property lists of the deceased people. Through her examples, she informs us about significant details, for instance, she uncovers that a judge needed to determine the market value of enslaved people so that he can give the slaveholder the permission for manumission.<sup>51</sup> To get a better insight on the market value of slaves, she enumerates the prices of slaves ranging from 1,000 *akçes* to 6,666 *akçes*. In another study dealing with slave traders in Istanbul, she brings to light the agency of the mediators in the slave trade rather than focusing only on the slave trade itself or the slaves. Her approach is important since she locates slavery within a complex system of networks. I think, in order to get a better understating of slavery in the empire, this approach should be an indispensable part of slavery studies. On the other hand, by focusing on identity, she opens up a space to articulate the “positive side of slavery.”<sup>52</sup> She suggests that enslaved people could learn a second language and acquire new qualifications in a craft. Her statement presents a second important example to the “good treatment thesis” and “attitude hurdle” among leading Ottomanists. Although I have gained

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<sup>49</sup> İnalcık, ‘Servile,’ 41,42 (Italics are mine)

<sup>50</sup> Faroqhi, *Stories of Ottoman Men and Women*, 95-265.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 139. See also Fisher, ‘Studies in Ottoman Slavery and Slave Trade, II: Manumission,’ 130.

<sup>52</sup> Faroqhi, *Stories of Ottoman Men and Women*, 139-151.

important insights from their works, I disagree with these scholars through the words of the Sudanese scholar, Yusuf Fadl Hasan, “slavery is slavery and cannot be beautified by cosmetics.”<sup>53</sup>

During the publication of İnalçık and Faroqhi’s studies, Halil Sahillioğlu also focuses on the social and economic aspects of slavery in Bursa and works meticulously with court documents.<sup>54</sup> His emphasis on the economic value of slavery reminds us again and again that slaves were seen and recognized as salable commodities. For instance, the price of an ordinary slave was almost equal to the value of an average house in Üsküdar.<sup>55</sup> What is further interesting among his findings is the part where he mentions the profession called *yuvacı*, who were slave hunters paid in different amounts according to distance taken by the fugitive slaves.<sup>56</sup> The existence of slave hunters underlines the economic value of slaves in the eyes of the masters since they were eager to pay these men to save their investments. It would be interesting to know whether *yavacı*s survived until the demise of the empire since I have never seen any reference to them throughout my research. Sahillioğlu’s meticulous work is referenced in Yvonne Seng’s book, where she merges her knowledge of methodology and languages in the study of fugitives and factotums in early 16<sup>th</sup> century Istanbul.<sup>57</sup> Like İnalçık, Faroqhi and Sahillioğlu, Seng works on similar aspects of slavery such as the types of manumission and the economic importance of the institution. Her careful study of *Şeriat* law points out

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<sup>53</sup> Hunwick, ‘The Same But Different: Africans in Slavery in the Mediterranean Muslim World,’ x.

<sup>54</sup> Sahillioğlu, ‘Slaves in the Social and Economic Life of Bursa in the Late 15<sup>th</sup> and Early 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries,’ 43-112.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>56</sup> Sahillioğlu, ‘Slaves in the Social and Economic Life of Bursa in the Late 15<sup>th</sup> and Early 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries,’ 95. See also Seng’s article below: Seng, ‘Fugitives and Factotums Slaves in Early Sixteenth-Century Istanbul,’ 136- 169. We are shown that slaves were eager to race for their freedom regardless of relative comfort of their circumstances while masters were unwilling to lose their fugitives slaves. We know that there was a professional slave hunter named *yavacı* and whoever brought fugitive for their efforts they receive a reward of 90 akçe for each fugitive captured.

<sup>57</sup> Seng, ‘Fugitives and Factotums Slaves in Early Sixteenth-Century Istanbul,’ 136- 169.

that slaves were considered as “property with-voice” (*mal-ı natık*) in comparison to “mute property” (*mal-ı samit*).<sup>58</sup> To show the value of a slave, she compares prices of the houses and the slaves just like the above examples presented by Faroqhi. For Üsküdar in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, one could find housing prices ranging from 200 *akçes* to 8,000 *akçes* while one could buy slaves between 300 *akçes* to 5,000 *akçes*. Comparisons between the values of the slaves and estates are important for us to understand slaves' economic value. The second part of her article concerning fugitives contributes to one of the conclusions of this study. According to her findings, slaves were eager to pursue freedom regardless of the relative comfort of their circumstances while masters were unwilling to lose their fugitive slaves. Seng also uses anthropologist Turner's concept of liminality to examine the transition of this “property with voice” into the community.<sup>59</sup> While proving cases of incorporation, she also displays the vulnerable positions of enslaved people in comparison to free people. This analysis of her will be emphasized with the cases used for this study. By underlying the importance of master-slave relationship, she remarks that the social status and identity of a slave was closely associated with that of his or her master, and have common points with Faroqhi.<sup>60</sup>

The studies examined so far have mostly dealt with white slaves from Caucasia, southeast Europe, and frontier regions of the expanding empire. Royal Jennings, on the other hand, focuses his gaze on enslaved Africans on the island of Cyprus.<sup>61</sup> First of all, he gives a detailed explanation for the terminology that connotes enslaved African in the judicial records of Lefkoşa.<sup>62</sup> He opens the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>59</sup> Seng, ‘A Liminal State Slavery in Sixteenth-Century Istanbul,’ 25-42.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>61</sup> Jennings, ‘Black Slaves and Free Black in Ottoman Cyprus, 1590-1640,’ 286-302.

<sup>62</sup> See for the difference among the terms *zenci*, or *zengi*; *siyah*, ‘*arab*, or *arap*; and *habeşi*. Jennings, “Black Slaves and Free Black in Ottoman Cyprus, 1590-1640,” 288.

discussion for the origin of the enslaved Africans by following trade routes and arrives at an assumption that they might have come from Sudan and Ethiopia.<sup>63</sup> His reference to the language of the archive presents an interesting discussion, that is, freed Africans were called specially as “black named” (*nam zenci*), a designation that has no justification in the *Şeriat* or in Ottoman practice, instead of being called “someone named” (*nam kimesne*).<sup>64</sup>

One should also mention the contributions of İzzet Sak, who wrote both his MA thesis and PHD dissertation on slavery in Konya, a city in the central Anatolia.<sup>65</sup> His study reveals that the number of slaves from Africa occupied the second largest group after the slaves coming from Russia. As in the work of Jennings, different types of terminology were used when mentioning enslaved Africans, notably Sudanese, Ethiopians and Moorish. One of his cases dealing with a fugitive enslaved African man reveals that this man could not speak Turkish.<sup>66</sup> The lack of the knowledge of the dominant language must have been just one of the difficulties of surviving in an unwelcoming land and could be counted as a reason for his escape. In another example, he narrates the story of the epilepsy attacks an enslaved African man suffered from.<sup>67</sup> But, his narration of the illness can perhaps be seen as an evidence of a religious cult, which was a common practice among enslaved Africans and played an important role in the African diaspora.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Jennings, ‘Black Slaves and Free Black in Ottoman Cyprus, 1590-1640,’ 292.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 299.

<sup>65</sup> Sak, ‘16. ve 17. Yüzyıllarda Konya’da Kölelik Müessesesi,’ MA thesis. Sak, ‘Şer’iye Sicillerine Göre Sosyal ve Ekonomik Hayatta Köleler (17. Ve 18.Yüzyıllar)’. See also Sak ‘Konya’da Köleler (16. Yüzyıl Sonu-17. Yüzyıl),’ 159-197; Sak, ‘Şer’iye Sicillerine Göre Kölelerin Milliyet ve Eşkali (17. ve 18.Yüzyıllar),’ 377-394; Sak, ‘İranlı Kölelerin Satışının Yasaklanması ile ilgili Fermanlar,’ 259-266.

<sup>66</sup> Sak, ‘Konya’da Köleler (16. Yüzyıl Sonu-17. Yüzyıl),’ 195.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>68</sup> For the details of the cult see: Toledano, ‘Cultural Responses of Enslaved Africans in the Ottoman Empire,’ 85-215.

Recently, young scholars have published articles with new methodological and historiographical approaches. Yaron Ben-Naeh conducted research on ownership of slaves in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Jewish community of Hasköy, one of the quarters of Istanbul.<sup>69</sup> Nur Sober-Khan wrote her thesis on the slave population of the 16<sup>th</sup> century Galata, another neighborhood of Istanbul.<sup>70</sup> Both of them, like the aforementioned researchers, benefited from court registers and employed their language abilities to draw a picture of the relationship between the enslaved people and the institution of slavery. For instance, Ben-Naeh in his article points out that slave ownership among the Jewish communities of the middle and upper classes was widespread at least from late 16<sup>th</sup> century to the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in contradiction to the *Şeriat* restriction of, or ban on, slaveholding by non-Muslims. By looking at slavery from within a non-Muslim community he arrives at two significant conclusions; first, Ottoman Jews engaged in slave owning for the same reasons that contemporary Muslims did: prestige, sexual fulfillment, and obedient domestic help; and second, there was acculturation of the Jewish community to Islamic-Ottoman norms by making some modifications.<sup>71</sup> Nur Sober-Khan's masterfully written PhD dissertation should be a must-read for any student of slavery studies. Her way of approaching the sources by underlining methodological problems as well as the dilemmas concerning the restricted use of terminology poses serious challenges to the studies mentioned above. She also writes on the psychology and sociology of slave work contracts (*mukâtaba*), which is amongst the state-of-the-art contributions of hers to the field.

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<sup>69</sup> Ben-Naeh, 'Blond, tall, with honey-colored eyes: Jewish ownership of slaves in the Ottoman Empire,' 315-319.

<sup>70</sup> Sober-Khan, Slaves without shackles: Forced labour and manumission in the Galata court registers, 1560-1572, Ph. D dissertation.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 332.

By way of İnalçık and Faroqhi, I have presented the examples of “good treatment thesis” or “attitude hurdle” which were criticized and replaced by young scholars like Sober-Khan and Yaron. This shift in approaches and history writing give us hope for the future of slavery studies. However, there are still some works published to exemplify the hurdle thesis. For instance, in his study on the social status of slaves in the district of 17<sup>th</sup> century Rodosçuk, Ümit Ekin still assumes that slavery was abolished in the Ottoman Empire and its remnants were destroyed entirely by the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## 2.2 Enslavement as a gendered experience

In Ottoman slavery studies, the lack of gendered analysis of the institution had limited our understanding of the experience of women in general and enslaved women in particular. However, last couple of decades have witnessed the publication of works, by very few scholars, that use gender as a category of historical analysis. Leslie Peirce, a renowned historian of the early modern Ottoman Empire, in her first book discussing the shifting nature of imperial politics, posits harem slavery at the center of her inquiry.<sup>72</sup> Her book further challenges both the voyeuristic view of the harem and the writings focusing on the institutional aspect of seraglio.<sup>73</sup> Her book, covering mainly the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, demonstrates how parallel to the changing demands of the growing empire, the nature of royal marriage and/or concubinage changed over time. After 1453, with the conquest of Constantinople, Ottomans abandoned inter-dynastic marriages for the system of concubinage. These concubines, like other slaves brought to the palace as slave girls from various ethnic

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<sup>72</sup> Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire*, 3-15.

<sup>73</sup> On the Harem, see: Uluçay, *Harem*. Penzer, *The harem: an account of the institution as it existed in the palace of Turkish sultans with a history of the Grand Seraglio from its foundation to the present time*. Durukan, *The Harem of the Topkapı Palace*.13-17.

backgrounds, were educated in religion, language, art and skills of various kinds. Even though some of these young slaves managed to succeed in rising to a higher position, like being the sultan's concubine and the mother of the princes, the uncertainty of life within bondage and after slavery shaped their lives in a fundamental way. The book rethinks the agency of the royal concubines in the imperial palace, where these women could cultivate networks of influence and patronage. Since the book focuses on the royal concubines, it stays silent about enslaved Africans. Peirce also informs her readers about the different character of elite slavery in comparison to chattel slaves in Europe and the Americas, but in her another book directs the attention of the reader to the temporality of elite enslavement.<sup>74</sup>

Zilfi, on the other hand, examines the different aspects of slavery from capture through sale and later manumission to a fruitful discussion of the English term 'slave'. In contrast to the "good treatment thesis" and "attitude hurdle", she presents a powerful argument against what she calls 'benevolent stewardship' apology for slavery in the Middle East by stressing the insidious aspects of slavery and the slave trade. She mentions an abundance of documents that narrate the abuse of mistresses and masters, rape by traders and raiders, transportation to the urban centers of the empire in crude caravans, starvation, hardship, and illness. In her analysis, the discussion concerning the status of women, the function of slavery and the gender hierarchy at the core of household structure is foregrounded. By limiting her study to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, particularly up until the 1830s and largely focusing on Istanbul, she tackles the ownership of female slaves' sexuality within the context of

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<sup>74</sup> According to her, although their legal status was that of a slave, these servants of the dynasty should not be thought of as analogous to chattel slaves as we know them from the history of Europe and the Americas. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem*, 39. See also: Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*, 315.



the subservience of Ottoman women in general. The book also engages in an important discussion related to color, race and ethnicity of the slaves by pointing out the predicaments of black Africans. For instance they could not have expected to escape racist derogation when members of ostensibly dominant ethnicities were not of the same color as them.<sup>75</sup> In this part, she clearly demonstrates that race, or more precisely skin color had different connotations and consequences in the lives of the enslaved people. One of the important contributions of the book also lies in its discussion of the interrelated themes of women, gender and social hierarchy.<sup>76</sup>

The path opened by Peirce and Zilfi has been followed by the PhD thesis of Betül İpşirli and Ceyda Karamürsel. By focusing on former female palace slaves in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century, İpşirli examines the interactions between manumitted female palace slaves (*sarayîs*), the palace, and the neighborhoods in which they settled. By looking at patronage relationship created by bonds of clientage or *velâ* in Ottoman Turkish and the lives of enslaved women outside of the imperial wall, she provides what is probably one of the first meticulously written studies on the implication of manumission in the lives of enslaved women.<sup>77</sup> Karamürsel's last publication creates a new space for a gendered politics of emancipation and the role of race in the suppression of slave trade and slavery.<sup>78</sup> It would not be wrong to assume that her unpublished PHD thesis titled “‘In the Age of Freedom, In the Name of Justice’: Slaves, Slaveholders, and the State in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish

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<sup>75</sup> Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 136.

<sup>76</sup> Zilfi, ‘Servants, slaves, and the domestic order in the Ottoman Middle East,’ 1-33. Zilfi, ‘Thoughts on women and slavery in the Ottoman era and historical sources,’ 131-138.

<sup>77</sup> İpşirli-Argit, ‘Manumitted Female Slaves of the Ottoman Imperial Harem (Sarayîs) in Eighteenth-Century Istanbul,’ Ph. D dissertation.

<sup>78</sup> Karamürsel, ‘The Uncertainties of Freedom: The Second Constitutional Era and the End of Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire,’ 138-139

Republic, 1858-1993” will be a a groundbreaking work in understanding of Ottoman slavery.<sup>79</sup>

We should not omit the significance of Ferhunde Özbay’s article on gender and class for feminist historiography.<sup>80</sup> She traces the similarities between slavery and *beslemelik* (an official adaption of children). Even though they do not involve any gendered perspective, we can count the works of Toledano, where he narrates the story on the ill-fated pregnancy of Semsigul and Erdem’s article on an incendiary and fugitive enslaved African woman.<sup>81</sup> Both articles provide important insights into the role gender played regarding the ills of the institution. On the other hand, questions of gender in the lives of eunuchs remain largely unstudied.

### 2.3 Slave trade and the question of abolition

The first serious book on the subject was written by Bernard Lewis in 1971. His book, *Race and Color in Islam*, was revised and expanded into a later book by incorporating new sources as well as new perspectives.<sup>82</sup> Under the supervision of Lewis, Toledano followed the path which had been opened by Lewis and wrote his PhD dissertation, which turned out to be the first book on the slave trade between 1840 and 1890. His first book dealt with the modes of slave acquisition, slave traders, the volume of the traffic, British efforts to abolish Ottoman slavery and its abolition.<sup>83</sup> In his second book, this time, his approach involved “an attempt to humanize the narrative and take it beyond the plane of numbers, tables and charts.”<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Karamürsel, ‘ ‘In the Age of Freedom, In the Name of Justice’: Slaves, Slaveholders, and the State in the Late Ottoman Empire and Early Turkish Republic, 1857–1933,’ Ph.D dissertation.

<sup>80</sup> Özbay, ‘Evlerde *el kızları*: Carieyeler, evlatlıklar, gelinler,’ 13-49.

<sup>81</sup> Toledano, ‘The Other Face of Harem Bondage: Abuse and Redress,’ 54-80. Erdem, ‘Magic, theft, and arson: the life and death of an enslaved African woman in Ottoman İzmit,’ 125-146.

<sup>82</sup> Lewis, *Race and Color in Islam*. Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*, 3-16.

<sup>83</sup> Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression*, 3-14

<sup>84</sup> Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, preface, x

In this book, we are presented with the plight of the main characters. Almost at the same time, Hakan Erdem was writing on the same topic at Oxford University while expanding the dates of his research and issues. For instance, the part Erdem discussed the term *zimmi* and its legality concerning child levy, *devshirme* system are missing in Toledano. Also, the policy of Abdülhamid II on slavery and the Young Turks approach to the institution and emancipation and care of slaves must also be analyzed. Even though in parts they use the same material, their conclusions are slightly different on significant aspects, such as the Britain's involvement in the Ottoman slave trade. Toledano claims that Britain at first had aimed to abolish slavery, but eventually she had to replace this goal with suppressing the slave trade. Erdem, on the other hand, challenged this assumption by stating that the British government had never intended to ask the Ottomans to abolish slavery outright. Both historians' successes result from their abundant use of primary sources found in different archives notably *Başbakanlık Arşivi* in Istanbul or The Public Record Office in London, Ministère des Affaires étrangères in Paris and so on.

To be more comprehensive, we should add Ralph Austen's research on the Mediterranean slave trade, John Wright and Paul Lovejoy's on the Trans-Saharan trade<sup>85</sup> and most recently Behnaz Mirzai on Iran,<sup>86</sup> Ismael M. Montana on Ottoman Tunisia,<sup>87</sup> and R. David Goodman on Morocco.<sup>88</sup> We should also refer to studies, which address the abolition of slavery in Egypt and Africa in general.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Some of their publications: Austen, 'Mediterranean Slave Trade Out of Africa: A Tentative Census,' 214-248, 1992. Wright, *The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade*. Lovejoy, 'Commercial Sectors in the Economy of the Nineteenth-Century Central Sudan: The Trans-Saharan Trade and the Desert-Side Salt Trade,' 85-116.

<sup>86</sup> Mirzai, 'Slavery, the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and the Emancipation of Slaves in Iran (1828-1928),' Ph.D dissertation.

<sup>87</sup> Montana, 'The Trans-Saharan Slave Trade, Abolition of Slavery and Transformation in the North African Regency of Tunis, 1759-1846,' Ph.D dissertation.

<sup>88</sup> Goodman, 'The End of Domestic Slavery in Fes, Morocco,' Ph.D dissertation.

<sup>89</sup> Baer, *Studies in the Social History of Modern Egypt*. Baer, 'Slavery in Nineteenth Century Egypt.' Mowafi, *Slavery, Slave Trade and Abolition Attempts in Egypt and the Sudan 1820-1882*, 5-

## 2.4 Bottom-up approach and ethnographic studies

Toledano's last book has signalled a new era in the studies of Ottoman slavery. It pays more attention to the methods used and introduces an historical analysis that unearths the voices of the slaves.<sup>90</sup> As Kırılı points out "even well-established scholars whose previous works largely reflected the tendencies and concerns of the economic and social history of the 1970s could not resist the temptation which results from the great movement "history from below."<sup>91</sup> Khan also states that in her thesis, "a spate of articles on the topic of slavery has emerged, attempting to arrive at a cultural history of slavery from the bottom up that allows the voice of the slave to be heard." Spivak's work on India under the British Raj has influenced the works of some authors who have raised question about the nature of slavery studies. The historian, it is argued, is too often resigned to the seeming absence of direct "voice evidence" instead of working hard and in innovative ways to recover the missing voices. Trout Powell takes Spivak's challenge to the historiography of Hindu women, and applies it to slavery studies of Middle East, suggesting that historians should not resign themselves to the apparent absence of slave voices.<sup>92</sup> In a recently published book on enslaved women, violence and the archive in Barbados, Marisa Fuentes also endeavours to show "how incomplete narratives, non-conforming structures, and different modes of writing can be used as tools to reveal a more tenable method to tell subaltern stories."

Almost at the same time with Powell's query, both Toledano and Erdem expanded the range of their research by reconstructing the experiences of enslaved

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<sup>90</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, 9-60.

<sup>91</sup> Kırılı, 'From Economic History to Cultural History in the Ottoman Empire,' 377.

<sup>92</sup> Trout-Powell, 'Will that subaltern ever speak? Finding African slaves in the historiography of the Middle East,' 242-261. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, 52.

persons in the Ottoman Empire. In an attempt to replace the supposed lack of individual testimonies of the enslaved, the former's approach is worth quoting at length:

I shall refer to the patchwork required by this approach alternatively as "voice recovery" and "experience reconstruction." The historian's craft in this case means filling holes by resorting to the knowable and verifiable social and cultural context, bridging gaps by carefully allowing a measured use of the educated imagination that, for the historian, brings to life people and communities long gone. For this to work, both the historian and the readers must be comfortable with a reasonable amount of speculation.<sup>93</sup>

Toledano's last chapter in the book titled "Taming the Unknown with the Familiar" can be regarded as a foundation of his coming article on the topic. Like this chapter in the book, the article "Coping with Trauma in a New World: Cultural Response of Enslaved Africans in the Ottoman Empire" focuses on *Zar*, roughly speaking a number of spirit and healing cults practiced by enslaved and freed Africans in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>94</sup> In so doing, he speaks of 'Ottoman cultural creolization' with an unseen anthropological approach of his entire writings on slavery. One of the important contributions of the book is that it highlights the complex web of reciprocity relations between the enslavers and enslaved people. His approach reminds me of the writings of Frederic Cooper on Islam and cultural hegemony, underlining the significance of relationship between slaves and their masters.<sup>95</sup>

With this shift, historians have expanded the pool of their sources to incorporate the life stories of enslaved and enslaver. The use of personal memoirs has gained importance. For instance, I wrote my final research project to finish my

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<sup>93</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent*, 39.

<sup>94</sup> Toledano, 'Coping with Trauma in a New World: Cultural Response of Enslaved Africans in the Ottoman Empire,' 185-214.

<sup>95</sup> Cooper, 'Islam and Cultural Hegemony: The Ideology of Slave Owners on the Eastern African Coast,' 271.

undergraduate study on the representation of the enslaved African in the memoir of Leylâ Saz Hanım.<sup>96</sup> Her narrative enables us to get insights regarding the psychological aspects of enslavement in the lives of enslaved women.<sup>97</sup> Other works that will be of interest to anyone curious about the legacies of enslaved Africans must take into account the works of Pervev Nail Boratav and Günver Güneş. Boratav, an eminent Turkish folklorist and researcher of the folk-literature, wrote on the representation of enslaved Africans in the folktales and their cult rituals during the Republic.<sup>98</sup> Günver Güneş investigates African cultural elements in Izmir.<sup>99</sup> Lastly we should also count the importance of travel literature in shaping our understanding of Ottoman slavery.<sup>100</sup>

Literature also has been used to enrich personal stories of enslaved people while enabling readers to gain some insights into the perception of blackness and meaning of slavery. We first count the book of İsmail Parlatır on the theme of slavery in *Tanzimat* literature.<sup>101</sup> Deniz Kandiyoti also traced the “women question” by using the novels of the late Ottoman and early republican period.<sup>102</sup> These studies in literature open up a new window into the issue of slavery; many of the social scientists have come to an agreement that they are not only cock-and-bull stories but also alternative documents for historians, especially social ones. For instance, Eve M. Troutt Powell’s recent book *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan and Ottoman Empire* sets an important example here.

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<sup>96</sup> Leylâ Saz Hanım, *19. Yüzyılda Saray Haremi*, 1-25.

<sup>97</sup> For the detailed story of Yekta, see, Leylâ Saz Hanım, *19. Yüzyılda Saray Haremi*, 30.

<sup>98</sup> Boratav, ‘The Negro in Turkish Folklore,’ 251.

<sup>99</sup> Güneş, ‘Kölelikten Özgürlüğü: İzmir’de Zenciler ve Zenci Folkloru,’ 4-10.

<sup>100</sup> White, *Three Years in Constantinople or Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1844*.

<sup>101</sup> Writer’s approach is too much descriptive. See, Parlatır, *Tanzimat Edebiyatında Kölelik*.

<sup>102</sup> Kandiyoti, ‘Slave Girls, Temptresses, and Comrades: Images of Women in the Turkish Novel,’ 35-49.

## 2.5 Memory and recent Studies

Before ending this section I want to refer to an Afro-Turkish author and activist Mustafa Olpak's book. In his introduction, Erdem points out the fact that "there was no organised movement for abolition in the empire, no abolitionist tracts popularising the subject and bringing home the sufferings of slaves – real or imagined." Erdem's observation was valid until the publication of Mustafa Olpak's book titled *Kenya-Crete-Istanbul: Human Biographies from the Slave Coast* in 2005. Olpak traces his family history by revealing the pain behind the unknown aspects of Ottoman slavery. The book delves into the family tragedy, which results from bondage and the stain of the institution on the lives of descendants. Its publication enabled Olpak to organize the Afro-Turk community in 2006. The book attracted the attention of Turkish media, a documentary named *Baa Baa Black Girl (Arap Kızı Camdan Bakıyor)* broadcasted in one of the most important state channels in Turkey, TRT 2.<sup>103</sup> It was followed by an oral history project entitled *Voices from Silent Past: An Oral History Study on the Past and Present of Being An Afro-Turk* by the History Foundation in Turkey, TTK. The principal aim of late Olpak had become to promote the studies on enslaved Africans and Afro-Turks whose histories have been ignored by official historiography in Turkey.

Fortunately, over the last couple of years there has been scholarly interest in the history of enslaved African in the Ottoman Empire. Michael Ferguson completed his PhD thesis at McGill University. His research is based on social and cultural history of enslaved and manumitted Africans and their descendants in the region of Izmir in the late Ottoman Empire. Ezgi Çakmak is enrolled at University of Pennsylvania, works on the notion of "free labor", the practice of *besleme*, child

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<sup>103</sup> *Arap Kızı Camdan Bakıyor (Baa Baa Black Girl.)*

adoption under the supervision of Eve Troutt Powell. Solmaz Çelik is also writing her MA thesis on the social and cultural history of enslaved Africans at Sabancı University.<sup>104</sup> Ayşegül Kayagil is tracing the racial and ethnic boundaries in Turkey by examining Afro-Turks, Marta Scaglioni is working on blacks at the border between Libya and Tunisia by benefiting from both anthropology and history.



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<sup>104</sup> We convened in 2016 under the MESA Panel titled “African Slavery and Its Legacies in the Late Ottoman Empire and Turkey: Power Relations in the Everyday.” 11, 19, 2016, Boston Marlott Copley Place.



## CHAPTER 3

### AFRICAN SLAVES IN THE OTTOMAN SOCIETY

#### THE ARCHIVAL RECORD

Even though the development of microhistory since 1970s has not ushered into a new era in Ottoman studies, it has inevitably influenced some Ottomanists and their studies.<sup>105</sup> According to Giovanni Levi, a pioneer historian on microhistory, this sub-discipline of social history constitutes a means in writing ordinary people into the grand historical narratives in order to change these narratives.<sup>106</sup> This articulation of microhistory is congenial to this chapter in particular and the thesis in general since this chapter aims to recover unknown lives of four enslaved Africans -two female and two male- in order to contribute to and alter the grand historical narratives, which are especially reticent about enslaved Africans and their desires for freedom. As Avi Rubin rightly observes, trying to define microhistory will confine its wide range of methodologies and objectives<sup>107</sup>, but on the other hand, a need for methodological approach is explicit for our micro-historical purposes.

Here, it is necessary to register a note of caution with regard to methodology. It is not by chance that we have come across “microhistory”, “history from below” and “histories of everyday life” one after another since they appeared in the context of developments in social and cultural history since the 1980s.<sup>108</sup> In the words of a noteworthy scholar on historiography, “these different sorts of history do have a

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<sup>105</sup> See for example: Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*. Toledano, ‘Slave Dealers, Pregnancy, Abortion, and the World of Women: The Story of a Circassian Slave Girl in mid-Nineteenth Century Cairo,’ 53–86. Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*. Agmon, *Family and Court: Legal Culture and Modernity in Late Ottoman Palestine*. Paz, ‘Crime and Criminals and the Ottoman State: Anatolia between the late 1830s and the late 1860s,’ PhD dissertation. Rubin, ‘The Slave, the Governor, and the Judge: An Ottoman Socio-Legal Drama from the Late Nineteenth Century,’ 87-103.

<sup>106</sup> Levi, ‘On Microhistory,’ 93-113.

<sup>107</sup> Rubin, ‘The Slave, the Governor, and the Judge: An Ottoman Socio-Legal Drama from the Late Nineteenth Century,’ 88.

<sup>108</sup> See, for example: Brewer, ‘Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life,’ 87-109.

family resemblance, a common set of preoccupations and shared culture that merits investigation.”<sup>109</sup> These historiographic issues have been brilliantly discussed by some historians and lie outside the scope of this thesis.<sup>110</sup> In order to make my methodological approach clear, I will draw on the tools of microhistory. It is suffice here to state that in general terms microhistory focuses on the qualitative rather than the quantitative, the lived experience of ordinary people rather than the big figures, it applies itself to the practices, habits, values, mentalities and feelings of the oppressed, those who “have traditionally been excluded from historical accounts and remained largely anonymous in history”.<sup>111</sup> Within the space of microhistory, a proper treatment of agency is of great importance. It seeks, in a way, to display the extent of as well as the limits on agency. This specificity of microhistory also fits the cases that I am going to examine throughout the chapter. As we shall see, the cases involve the ability of enslaved Africans to make choices and to take responsibility for the important actions shaping their lives.

Toledano, in a brilliant discussion, uses a well-articulated motto in his last book on slavery, which is “actions speak louder than words.” He explains that in his approach, action will encompass commission as well as omission - “that is not only what the enslaved did but also what they did not do, whether by choice or because of various constraints.”<sup>112</sup> The following cases will point out both the abilities and disabilities of enslaved Africans in their attempt to put an end to their enslavement either resulting from maltreatment or motivated by the hope of a new life without bondage.

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<sup>109</sup> Brewer, ‘ Microhistory and the Histories of Everyday Life,’91.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example: Port, ‘History from Below, the History from Everyday Life, and Microhistory,’ 108.

<sup>111</sup> Port, ‘History from Below, the History from Everyday Life, and Microhistory,’ 108.

<sup>112</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 35.

### 3.1 Using court records: Between history and anthropology

As it has been examined in the literature review section, historians have benefited from the use of *Şeriat* court records in their studies, but as Toledano underlines, new administrative court records of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which includes court rulings on murder and theft cases, are “patiently awaiting interested scholars at the Istanbul Prime Minister Archives.”<sup>113</sup> Keeping this invitation in my mind, the following chapter is based on four main cases dug from that archive. The use of court records in understanding the history of ordinary people is not uncommon. With a sophisticated reading of two court records of 16<sup>th</sup> century Aintab, Leslie Peirce in her *Morality Tales* contributed the methodological novelty to Ottoman *sicil* studies.<sup>114</sup> Haim Gerber, Ronald C. Jennings, Amy Singer, Iris Agmon, Boğaç Ergene Işık Tamdoğan has worked on various courtships of the empire, and thus they have provided the well-researched data for those who are interested in this source material. A common feature of their scholarship is that they rely on *şeriat* court records, which help historians in an important way to retrieve the voice of the marginalized groups like women, peasants, slaves.<sup>115</sup> I would not expatiate them here but would like to say few words about Terence Walz’s article “Black Slavery in Egypt During the Nineteenth Century as Reflected in the Mahkama Archives of Cairo” which is inspiring and has much in common with the findings of this chapter. The article also engages with an important debate pertaining to the era covered under the present study. Even though it was published in 1985, it brings out some significant aspects of

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>114</sup> Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*, 105-106. For the discussion on the place and status of mediation see, Ergene, ‘Why Did Ümmü Gülsüm Go to Court? Ottoman Legal Practice between History and Anthropology,’ 215-244.

<sup>115</sup> Gerber, *State, Society, and Law in Islam: Ottoman Law in Comparative Perspective*. Jennings, ‘Kadı, Court and Legal Procedure in 17th-C. Ottoman Kayseri,’ 133-72. Singer, *Palestinian Peasants and Ottoman Officials: Rural Administration around Sixteenth Century Jerusalem*. Agmon, *Family and the Courts: Legal Culture and Modernity in Late Ottoman Palestine*. Tamdoğan, ‘Amicable Agreements (Sulh) and the Eighteenth-Century Ottoman Courts of Üsküdar and Adana,’ 55-83.

slaves and ex-slaves who appeared in a survey of court documentation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Cairo. It draws a picture of enslavement with all its pains and hurts from the perspective of enslaved Africans as far as his sources render it possible.

Pertaining to methodological constraints, following questions might rise: Does that subaltern, enslaved Africans in our cases, ever speak? Is it possible to retrieve the voices of slaves in spite of an accepted view, which claims the absence of the slaves' voices themselves?

A difficulty in studying the suppressed voices of the subaltern masses in the documents generated by the state apparatus has not for the first time been discussed by Ottomanists. Beginning with the 1980s, the Subaltern studies group suggested reading the documents "against the grain" to recover the absent and silenced voices of "small people". Powell finds Spivak's questions about the voices of the subaltern relevant to the studies on slavery. She states that

Spivak acknowledges the importance of "decipherment" for recovering the slaves' speech. Yet this is not easily done, especially regarding a topic that invokes deep anger at slavery and sympathies with the muted slaves.<sup>116</sup>

Following the contribution of subaltern studies, studies have benefited from anthropological approaches, especially Geertz's "thick description", that have been useful in answering some of the methodological questions. For instance, Peirce provides one of the pioneering examples in Ottoman studies by relating the court of the city to its ordinary people and its political, cultural and religious world.<sup>117</sup> Sharing this willingness with Peirce to benefit from the methodologies of anthropology, Toledano also applies the method of backing and filling, which he also

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<sup>116</sup> Troutt-Powell, 'Will that subaltern ever speak? Finding African slaves in the historiography of the Middle East,' 243-244.

<sup>117</sup> Peirce, *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*, 19-86.

derives from Geertz's thick description. What Toledano prefers to call "voice recovery" and "experience reconstruction", is worth quoting at length:

The historian's craft in this case means filling holes by resorting to the knowable and variable social and cultural context, bridging gaps by carefully allowing a measured use of the educated imagination that, for the historian, brings to life people and communities long gone.<sup>118</sup>

On the other hand, these methodological novelties have also brought out a debate concerning the danger of overinterpretation. We should be aware of this caution, as put by Boğaç Ergene, this new intervention leads "us Ottomanists to rethink and question many of the methodological choices that we advertently or inadvertently make in our attempts to decipher our sources."<sup>119</sup> It is one of the inevitable duties of historians who play an important role in the interpretation of their sources.

### 3.2 Nature of court records used

The long 19<sup>th</sup> century ushered many new phases into the world, and empires had to face with the new challenges such as nationalism and modernization. The Ottoman Empire did not remain insensitive and sought after solutions to cope with those challenges. Amongst the developments, which took place during the late Ottoman Empire, the reforms targeting many spheres of society including the area of law and justice are particularly important. These reforms led to new implications for the lives of enslaved Africans. Although according to Gökçen Alpkaya, women and slaves were less equal elements (*unsur*) of this reform age since both women and slaves were neglected by the order of law, the law brought an important novelty, "it changed "the *Şeriat*-derived practice that slaveholders were responsible for punishing their slaves and brought the state into the enslaver-enslaved relationship to protect

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<sup>118</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 35.

<sup>119</sup> Boğaç Ergene's review of *Morality Tales: Law and Gender in the Ottoman Court of Aintab*. 229.

the enslaved and reduce arbitrary punishment.”<sup>120</sup> In this challenge, the state undertook a new role, what Toledano prefers to call the “nanny state” which assumed protection of the weaker groups in society. In the words of Omri Paz:

Toledano argues that the Tanzimat state gradually assumed the role of patron vis-à-vis the enslaved and intervened in the enslaver-enslaved relationship. The state thus withdrew from its traditional stance of siding with the enslavers, and protecting their property rights over the enslaved. Instead, the Ottoman government began to assume the role of ward over the enslaved.<sup>121</sup>

The cases used in this chapter are important in the way of showing us the role of state within the relationship between the enslaver and the enslaved. And the cases in some ways prove the protectionist role of the state, but also warn us of the danger of generalization since every region could apply different rules for different cases, which did not always favor slaves. For instance, a recent article can serve here as an illustration to demonstrate the indifference of the state to the plea of a slave woman. The case comes from another legal source called *Ceride-i Mehakim* (Journal of Courts). It narrates the story of an enslaved woman named Bezmihal who accessed a judge with a plea for manumission. Even though she belonged to the category of white slaves, probably either Circassian or Georgian, this case also serves here as a bridge to the first case of this chapter. Her plea was based on the alleged maltreatment of her master who had beaten her and wanted to sell her after twelve years of service. The kind-hearted judge granted her a manumission paper without following the standard procedure, which required a court hearing. This action of the judge not only did not change the destiny of Bezmihal in bondage but also resulted in judge’s arrest. I will not go into the detail about the case, but I would like to emphasize that the court was not interested in the question of Bezmihal’s freedom,

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>121</sup> Paz, ‘Crime and Criminals and the Ottoman State: Anatolia between the late 1830s and the late 1860s,’ Ph.D dissertation, 38.

rather its main concern was the procedural violations of the judge. The author informs us “Bezmihal had been returned to her master, perhaps to a miserable destiny of further beatings, as the judge was no longer there to protect her.”<sup>122</sup>

In this chapter, I will look at the microanalysis of four different cases coming from four different locations of the Ottoman Empire; *Rodos* (1861), *Konya* (1863), *Resmo* (1846), and *Cidde* (1858). Through reading different cases, I have decided to focus on these four cases since they give me an opportunity to trace which options were available to slaves and what factors determined the choices they made. Despite the limiting context in bondage, enslaved Africans made their own calculations about how to take advantage of the situation in a variety of settings. But the cases illustrate the empowerment strategies of enslaved Africans as well as their vulnerability and exposure to various types of violence. Here, we can also hear the voices and the lives of enslaved Africans, sometimes directly and sometimes with helps of the mediators like governors. The caution should be noted at this point that the cases do not aim to represent the general pictures of all slaves; the modest aim, rather, has been to point out some important aspect of enslavement in the light of court records. The cases all derive from the folios under the Supreme Council of Judicial Ordinance *Meclis-i Vâlâ-yı Ahkân-ı Adliye*, hereafter MVAA. Hence, a short overview of MVAA is necessary. MVAA was the outcome of many changes; here I will give a short overview of its development. The establishment of the MVAA by Sultan Mahmut II in 1838 may be considered the beginning of the process that eventually led to the emergence of the *Nizamiye* courts.<sup>123</sup> It was the earliest attempt to form a high court

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<sup>122</sup> I should note here that Avi Rubin reaches an opposite conclusion, according to him, the verdict of this case did not change the fact that “the patron-state was increasingly attentive to the needs of the slaves and willing to confront slave owners. The result may indicate ‘the heartlessness of the modern, panoptic state, with its set-in stone procedures.’ See Rubin, ‘The Slave, the Governor, and the Judge: An Ottoman Socio-Legal Drama from the Late Nineteenth Century,’ 103.

<sup>123</sup> On the information of MVAA, see: Seyitdanlioğlu, ‘Tanzimat Devrinde Meclis-i Vâlâ (1838-1868)’, 217-220. Rubin, *Ottoman Nizamiye Courts, Law and Modernity*, 22-31.

that had the potential to challenge the judicial monopoly of the *Şeriat* courts. This change in particular and legal changes of the empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in general affected the lives of enslaved Africans vis-à-vis their masters, which we have pointed out above.<sup>124</sup> The Supreme Council was primarily in charge of legislation in certain, limited fields, but it also served as a high court for cases that originated from such legal bodies as the governors' divans in the provinces and other qualified judicial bodies.<sup>125</sup> For these four cases, MVAA, served as a "high court of appeal" or what Mehmet Seyitdanlıoğlu prefers to call an "appeal court" which intervened in the work of lower courts in order to reach convictions.<sup>126</sup>

As I have pointed out in the beginning of the thesis, there was no legal law promulgated in the history of the Ottoman Empire to abolish slavery. Neither were any special regulations placed in the criminal codes to distinguish the slaves from the free Ottoman subjects in the application of punishments. The Imperial Gülhane Reform Decree in 1839 referred to all subjects of the empire without exception and guaranteed all subjects security for life, honor and fortune. The new Penal Code was promulgated one year later in 1840, which did not include any specific reference to crimes committed by slaves; hence, "the penalties prescribed in the Penal Code for free criminals should also apply to offenders in bondage."<sup>127</sup> On the other hand, according to Gökçen Alpkaya, there were some ambiguities concerning the application of the laws in practice. For instance, an article 24 in the Ottoman Constitution of 1876 claimed, "confiscation, forced labor and abandum are forbidden", but slaves and women were not in a position to benefit from this

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<sup>124</sup> Toledano, 'The Legislative Process in the Ottoman Empire in the Early Tanzimat Period: A Footnote,' 99-106. Toledano, 'Law, Practice, and Social Reality: A Theft Case in Cairo, 1854,' 153-173.

<sup>125</sup> Rubin, *Ottoman Nizamiye Courts Law and Modernity*, 24.

<sup>126</sup> Seyitdanlıoğlu, 'Tanzimat Dönemi'nde Yüksek Yargı ve Meclis-i Vâlâ-yı Ahkâm-ı Adliye (1838-1876),' 208.

<sup>127</sup> Toledano, 'The Legislative Process,' 101. See also, Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise*, 43.



article.<sup>128</sup> For instance, when Sultan Abdülhamid II was dethroned and his chief eunuch Cevher Agha was executed by the Young Turks, there was a debate concerning whether his belongings were confiscated into the state treasury or transferred to his former master Abdülhamid II.<sup>129</sup>

Lastly, it should be noted that these legal documents are read not only for the positive information they provide but also for what their discourse reveals about the experiences of enslaved Africans. While the records are official documents resulting from judicial inquiry, they provide glimpses into individual lives, aspirations, thoughts and emotions through the bits of dialogue quoted from enslaved Africans themselves. In the near absence of narratives written by slaves, these documents allow the voices of the individuals who are considered to be silent and invisible actors, to be heard. Now let us turn to a close reading of the cases.

### 3.3 A nameless African woman and a benevolent administrator

The first case goes back to the year 1861. It took place on the island of Rhodes and refers to an enslaved African woman whose name was unknown and who was just depicted as *bir re'is zenci* (one black Negro).<sup>130</sup> We are informed about the segments of her life in bondage and her escape attempt.<sup>131</sup> To able to contextualize the text,

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<sup>128</sup> Alp kaya, 'Tanzimat'ın "Daha Az Eşit" Unsurları: Kadınlar ve Köleler,' 10.

<sup>129</sup> I would like to thank Prof. Edhem Eldem for this information.

<sup>130</sup> Although the word Negro in English does not exactly denote the word *zenci* in Turkish, for this reason I use the Turkish term throughout the thesis. زنجی *zenji*: Ethiopian, a black man. زنجیّه *zenjiyye* (fem.) Redhouse, A Turkish and English Lexicon Shewing in English the Signification of Turkish Terms, 1874. For the ambiguities of the word *zenci*, see Ferguson, 'White Turks, Black Turks, and Negroes: The Politics of Polarization'. According to Ferguson, 'though historians of the Ottoman slave trade and its aftermath have shown the ambiguities of the word *zenci* even in that historical context, in both British and Ottoman sources the term "zenci" (as well as the feminine *zenciye*) is generally used to refer to a black skinned sub-Saharan African who was either enslaved or recently emancipated, and generally impoverished and unadapted to Ottoman culture and norms—what might otherwise be referred to as 'black, ignorant, and poor.' He also adds even today, Afro-Turks, as they are sometimes called, often face discrimination based on their skin color, including the use of the word "zenci" as a racial slur.

<sup>131</sup> BOA., MVL,785/44, 22 Ca 1277 (5 January 1840).

brief summary of the document will be useful. According to her oral testimony, which we know of through the words of a governor, *mutasarrıfı'l- Cezayir-i Bahr-i Sefid*, her former master had sold her in exchange for 2.000 *kuruş* while she was expecting a baby from him. The sale was based on a promise from a new master that he would manumit her within three years. In the new house, she had given a birth to a girl who had died immediately. Her new master had made her work for eight years without any prospect of freedom, which contradicted the agreement of three years. Plus, he had not performed his duty of clothing and feeding her properly. She was in a state of being garbless and employed for a 5 *kuruş* of monthly pay. But the final straw, which resulted probably in her absconding, must have been that that she was struck on the head and locked in a room without receiving any food for few days. At the first opportunity, she had reacted by absconding in order to put an end to the violent conduct of her master. On the advice of an acquaintance, she had intended to take a shelter in the house of a respected elder in the neighborhood; on the way she and the acquaintance were advised by a person, who belonged to *ehl-i Islam*, to appeal to the Ottoman state for a certain salvation. Hereupon, she had resorted to the house of *mutasarrıf* (governor of Rodos) and the governor had penned this dispatch to MVAA to receive permission to manumit her. Actually, appealing to MVAA might not have been an option unless an opposition came from the member of *meclis-i kebir*. In the course of granting a manumission paper for this woman, one of the members of the court had objected to her freedom by stating that her alleged maltreatment was groundless and she must be returned to her master. However, the *mutasarrıf* did not give up and was quite decided about ending the sufferings of this

woman. Owing to his position as a *mutasarrıf*, he was aware of the procedures concerning the regulations of manumission and used the very conscious language of a protocol:

Even if her allegation of mistreatment is groundless, she must be granted the manumission since she had become pregnant by her former master, which brought her inevitably the status of *ümm ü veled*. Even if the child is illegitimate, verbal contract of her sale was based on three years, which is already completed. Plus, she had worked in contempt for only 5 *kuruş* of a monthly salary without a proper garment. These things have no place in sharia or any law and in the permission of the merciful Sultan.<sup>132</sup>

Playing all his cards, *mutasarrıf* stated that even though he had suggested giving her a manumission paper without any difficulty, he had not yet received any response. He had written to the MVAA to grant her a manumission paper without any delay since she had complained about her uncertain position, which could result in her absconding. He asked for an immediate permission from MVAA. If it was not possible, he suggested that she must be returned to the master or bought from his master to be released.

The document is interesting in many ways: First of all, based on her testimony via the words of *mutasarrıf* it is clear that her two masters blatantly violated the principle of the *Şeriat*. In *Şeriat* a mother who gave birth to a baby from her master must earn the status of *ümm ü veled*, henceforth she could not be sold during her master's lifetime and would be automatically manumitted upon his death.<sup>133</sup> The former master of her had violated this very concrete principle and violations did not end here. Also, The Qur'an urges masters to treat their slaves kindly and one of the last injunctions of the Prophet states that "Feed them (slaves)

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<sup>132</sup> BOA., MVL,785/44: 'darbın asıl olmasa bile bu cariye'nin sahib-i evveli olan Müfitt'ten ümm ü veled ve na-meşru olduğu surette üç sene mukavele ile alınıbda sekiz sene bilâ-elbise yalnız beşer kuruş maaş ile muhakkeran istihdam olunması hiçbir şeriat ve kanunda olmayub hususuyla bunların böyle cebren tevfiıklarına rıza-yı merahim irtiza-yı sıfat-ı padişahi dahi olmadığından'

<sup>133</sup> Marmon, *Slavery in the Islamic Middle East*, 4.

with what you eat, and clothe them with what you wear, and do not assign them work that is beyond their capacity.” Her second master did not provide her the proper food and clothing, therefore violated the injunction clearly. At this point, the document indicates that the two masters openly violated the law in practice. If the enslaved woman was lying about the maltreatment, this would point out another significant aspect of the case, that is, the agency of the enslaved women who was eager to be free. Whether her claims were right or not, she must be aware of the fact that her alleged maltreatment was against the law. For this purpose, she went to the house of *mutasarrıf*, and most probably she had believed that he would save her. It would not be wrong to state that she was right about her decision since the *mutasarrıf* tried to do his best to save her and did not give up against an opponent who stopped the *meclis* from manumitting her. In this case *mutasarrıf* tried to act according to the procedures of the law, different from the judge in Bezmialem’s case. His reference to different kinds of Ottoman laws (*Şeriat*, *Kanun* and new regulation) also pointed out the continuities in the legal arena rather than clear-cut ruptures.<sup>134</sup> This case can also show that there were controversies amongst the members of *meclis*, between *mutasarrıf* and his opponent. Since we have also no knowledge of the result of the case- it might have resulted in the favor of the *mutasarrıf* or his opponents. If the case resulted against the former part, it would point the ambiguities in the saving role of the State.

Lastly, one can speculate on the authenticity of maltreatment or pregnancy, but should accept the fact that escaping from the clutches of slavery is seen as an irresistible impulse in this case. The next case will show us how an enslaved woman

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<sup>134</sup> Rubin, ‘Ottoman Judicial Change in the Age of Modernity: A Reappraisal,’ 119–40.

yearned for freedom even if there were no sign of maltreatment but just a potential new life outside the clutches of bondage.

### 3.4 Seeking freedom: an escape attempt of the enslaved African woman Zeyneb

The nameless enslaved woman's action, in the above case, was likely motivated by a search of refuge from abuse, of amelioration, perhaps of a better life but this second case examines a young runaway enslaved woman who in pursuit of abstract liberty.

This time she became her own voice since the case includes her interrogation

report.<sup>135</sup> This woman called Zeyneb tried to escape from bondage by running away from her master, but she fell victim to unscrupulous neighbors who deceived her by raising false hopes, and instead of helping her shut her in a hidden cell in their house for about five months. When she was not docile, they admonished her reminding the grim legal sentence she would receive if she was caught, and when that did not work threatened to kill her. Nevertheless, Zeyneb did not give up and one day when the trap door was left unlocked, she broke free and took refuge in another neighbor's house. The records do not make clear whether Zeyneb sought justice or it was one of the defendants that carried the case to the court. What we find clearly revealed, however, is the desperate and hopeless search for freedom of one young enslaved woman, and the vulnerability and loneliness which made her an easy prey for predators who stoked her craving for freedom but pounced on her at the moment she thought she was getting away, in order to re-enslave her.

The document is dated August 1863, and the incident it reports took place in the sub-district of Konya in central Anatolia. The protagonist in the case, as mentioned above, is a black enslaved woman named Zeyneb, who was the domestic

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<sup>135</sup> BOA., MVL, 652/36, 30 M 1280 (17 August 1863).

slave of *Nalçacı Hacı Mehmed*. Zeyneb's account survives in the archives because of her desire to have a new life outside of the bonds of enslavement. In other words, Zeyneb was not a passive victim who accepted her fate. On the contrary she was brave enough to take her destiny into her own hands and escape from bondage in order to gain her freedom. However, intentions do not always result in what is hoped for as this case will show. Promised a way to freedom by others, she was betrayed and abused by the couple in the same neighborhood, who encouraged and initially helped her.

Derviş Resul and his wife *Zenci Mahbube* were the people who asked Zeyneb to bring them a payment in gold and valuable items in return for providing her freedom. There is no indication that Zeyneb was especially ill-treated as a slave. While we do not know whether she suffered from the maltreatment of her mistress or master, we certainly do know that she wanted to live without bondage. When she decided to take action, Zeyneb simply told her master that she would attend an *Arab Düğünü* (Arab wedding), an occasion enslaved Africans participated where musical instruments were played.<sup>136</sup> In order to pursue her plans, she left the house by taking the gold and valuable items demanded by her presumed helpers. Although we do not have an explicit statement to the effect, we can assume that she must have thought that the couple Derviş Resul and his wife *zenci Mahbube* would provide her freedom, which could carry her into a new free life. As she had no kin or family ties, it is intriguing to think what she expected from her imagined future life. The evidence suggests that the basic motive behind the escape attempt was simply running away from bondage. There is no mention of a possible lover or of a place where she would

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<sup>136</sup> BOA., MVL, 652/36: 'Konya'da Sahibata mahallesinde sakin Buhara muhacirlerinden Derviş Resul ve zevcesi Mahbube nam hatun biraz altun ve kıymetli eşya götürde seni azad ettirelim deyü işfal eylediler bende Arab düğüne gideceğim diyerek Katırcı Hacı Osman'ın hanesine vardım.' For the details of the term Arab düğünü, see: Erdem, *Slavery*, 176, Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 239, Fatmagül Kırıcı, "Aydın Vilayetindeki Afrika Kökenliler(Afro Türkler), Ma thesis, 52.

go. What we know is that when the interrogator asked Zeynep how she came to know Mahbube, she answered that she and other slave girls went to Mahbube and Derviş Resul's house to have their fortunes read. During the cross examination Mahbube was questioned about what she told Zeyneb during the fortune telling session, and Mahbube replied that she told her that she had foreseen a journey for Zeyneb. This fortune-telling, being unaware of what difficulties were waiting for her, must have encouraged her to dream of her future life without bondage.

Zeyneb made her escape and took refuge in the couple's house as arranged according to her statements. Then she was kept for almost one month in a room with a perforated roof, which was part of the Resul and Mahbube's house. This was the start of Zeyneb's misfortunes after her escape. Since the public crier (*dellal*) was calling out about the escaped slave girl, the couple this time put Zeyneb in a hole capped with a trap door which was under the floor of the room, and she lived there for almost four months, virtually imprisoned.<sup>137</sup>

When the interrogator asked whether she had screamed to try to get help from outside, Zeyneb answered that she did not since Derviş Resul had told her that if caught she would be slaughtered to set an example to the other slaves. Resul had also threatened to death her with a knife by telling her to be silent, but in the same breath he kept saying that he had rescued other blacks (Arabiler) and he would do the same for her.<sup>138</sup>

After almost five months of captivity, she finally found an opportunity to escape at a moment when the trap door remained unlocked. She went straight to the

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<sup>137</sup> BOA., MVL, 652/36: 'Mahbube'ye evvel emirde olan damda bir mah mikdarı ihfâ eylemiş oldukları halde dellal nidası işitilmeyle bunun üzerine oturdukları odanın sadr tarafında üstü kapaklı mahali küşâd ile oraya el-kâ'id dört mah kadar burada dahi ihtifâ ile...'

<sup>138</sup> BOA., MVL, 652/36: 'Yanıma Mahbube ve kocası Derviş gelürdü feryad etmedim seni ibret için kesecekler deyü söylediler ve bir de Derviş elinde bıçak ile üzerime gelür sesini çıkarma seni telef ederim deyü söyledi başka Arabileri kurtardım seni dahi kurtarırım deyü söyledi'

house of *Arab* Selim, who was probably a slave of Mustafa Dede and told him what she went through. It is safe to assume that she was aware of the deception, telling him that Derviş Resul had brought a horse with money Zeyneb had given the couple and that he was riding it.<sup>139</sup> Then the investigation took a different course and we are no longer able to hear Zeyneb's voice. Since Derviş Resul and Mahbube denied the charges brought against them, the interrogator questioned different people in the neighborhood to check whether Zeyneb's accusations were correct or not, rather than to understand the possible motivations of Zeyneb's escape. The interrogators then tried to determine whether Derviş Resul had bought the horse or not. In the end the witnesses confirmed that Derviş Resul indeed bought a new horse. The police agent, *zabdiye* Abdurrahman confirmed that there had been a hole in one of the rooms of Resul and Mahbube's house, which looked like it had been newly filled. Finally Zeyneb's headscarf was found in the yard of the couple's house, corroborating to Zeyneb's narrative that she had been in the house. The interrogation reports end here. We have an additional page, summarizing the findings in the case and requesting them to be sent to Istanbul for the decision, but unfortunately, we don't know what was the outcome of the case just like the first case of the chapter. However, it is interesting to note that the members of the *meclis* demanded the release of Mahbube by asserting that the couple's children remained without their parents since Derviş Resul had already been imprisoned for a while.

For slavery studies in the Ottoman Empire, this case opens up a fascinating prospect. It shows an enslaved African woman in action, trying to change her destiny. It also reveals the difficulties involved in the transition from slavery to freedom and the vulnerability of slaves in the face of deception. The studies of

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<sup>139</sup> BOA., MVL, 652/36: 'bunlara başımdan geçeni söyledim Derviş Resul benim getirdiğim akçe ile bir at aldı buna biner idi'



Erdem and Toledano as well as the PHD thesis by Ebru Aykut Türker present cases of how enslaved individuals resorted to arson for different reasons.<sup>140</sup> Two of these cases by enslaved women, namely Feraset and Dilferah suggest that both committed the act in the hope of obtaining their freedom. They had stolen money and jewelry from the mansions of their masters and both had accomplices in undertaking the arson and were encouraged, instructed and instigated by mediators. Both Dilferah and Feraset stood trial in accordance with Article 163 of the Ottoman Penal Code. It is striking that both were sentenced to death by hanging with the consent of Sultan Abdülaziz. In a formulaic expression, the final verdicts stated that the punishment aimed to be a deterrent for others.<sup>141</sup> Türker has stated that among eight concubines who were convicted for arson between 1858 and 1873, seven had African origin and one was Circassian. Aykut-Türker proves that these women resorted to arson because they had been ill-treated or because they feared that they would be sold to other owners. She also adds that the desire to be free was another strong motive that motivated these women. The perpetrators committed arson with the intention of obtaining their freedom as had been promised by their instigators and accomplices. They had stolen money and jewelry before starting the fires. They were abused and were encouraged by others who wanted to profit from the knowledge these women had about the valuables by promising them marriage and freedom.<sup>142</sup>

In view of the themes that I have outlined above, it seems to me useful to focus on the details of our case in order to make some general observations. Zeyneb did not resort to arson as in the above cases. Instead, she chose to attempt an escape

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<sup>140</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 153-204. Erdem, 'Magic, Theft, and Arson: The Life and Death of an Enslaved African Woman in Ottoman Izmit,' 125-146. Aykut-Türker, 'Alternative Claims on Justice and Law: Rural Arson and Poison Murder in the 19th century Ottoman Empire,' PhD dissertation.

<sup>141</sup> Aykut Türker, 'Alternative Claims on Justice and Law: Rural Arson and Poison Murder in the 19th century Ottoman Empire,' PhD dissertation, 206.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

with the guidance of Resul and his wife *Zenci* Mahbube who promised her freedom as they apparently had done for others. We do not have any indication of ill-treatment as the motivation of Zeyneb's attempted escape or the fear of an impending sale. No possible lover played a role according to the records. Since she did not resort to arson as in the other cases above, she probably did not intend to do any harm to her owners and was not venomous. What Zeyneb wanted was to be a free woman even if she had not been subjected to any ill-treatment by her owners. This situation itself is particularly telling, pointing to the desire by an enslaved woman to be free even in seemingly non-violent situations. Actually it appears that the neighborhood where Zeyneb lived hosted an entire enslaved community, since Zeyneb could have claimed that she was taking leave to attend an *Arab düğünü*. Also we know from Mahbube's answer to the interrogator's question: Did Zeyneb come to your home for fortune telling and who accompanied her? Zeyneb replied that she went there with seven other black slave women. Thus, it is safe to assume that there were numerous enslaved Africans in the district of Konya, suggesting that she was not alone.<sup>143</sup> The testimony also points out that Zeynep shared the house with another enslaved woman whom Zeynep left behind. At the same time, this document demonstrates that there was no collaboration among the female slaves. The use of the title *zenci* for Mahbube (*Derviş Resul's zenci wife*) indicates that she was at one time during her life enslaved but manumitted possibly after her marriage with Derviş Resul or after giving birth to a child she gained the status of *ümmüveled* (mother of child). In this picture, Mahbube acted as an accomplice, and sided with her husband to deceive and abuse Zeyneb. This case brings to my mind this quote from Madeline C. Zilfi's book:

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<sup>143</sup> According to Nihat Engin, the most important centers of slave trade were notably Istanbul, and then Baghdad, Damascus, Erzurum, Konya, Medina, Aleppo in Asia; Cairo in Africa, Belgrade and Sofia in Europe. See Engin, 'Osmanlılar'da Kölelik,' 247.

They give their slave girls over to their wives' orders, and the dear little wives make them work all day and night, sticking them with a needle when they doze off. These dear wives, who were once household slaves [*halayık*] themselves, call their slave girls [*cariye*] "slut" and "whore."  
-Risale- i Garibe( ca. 1700)<sup>144</sup>

In the case examined by Erdem, Feraset was also incited by a companion of hers, a manumitted black slave named Selime, who told her that she too could become free if she stole the jewelry of her master and burned the house. As Zilfi points out, Ottoman history had little to say about the impact on the lives of freed slaves, much less on society at large, and less still on consequences to the post-abolition era or modern successor states.<sup>145</sup> These court records give us a rare opportunity to fill this serious gap. What we learn from the document about Zeyneb's plan after running away is that Mahbube claimed to have told Zeyneb that she saw a journey for her in her fortune (*Nalçacının Arablarına yol var deyü söyledim*). This was the bait she used to motivate Zeyneb to undertake the extreme risk that she took. We can conjecture that Zeynep was planing to start a new life outside the bonds of enslavement. The case examined by Türker also shows us how an enslaved woman was subjected to ill-treatment by his owner. The owner did split the wife and husband, trying to re-sell the women because of supposed disobedience and misbehaviour of her. Zeyneb in Türker's case also revealed in her deposition at the court that her owner gave her blows every day. She took her revenge at the risk of her own life by setting a fire, which resulted in the burning of more than 130 houses along with the mosque, *mescid*, school, and water cistern in the neighborhood. It, grievously, caused the death of the owner's pregnant sister. At the end, the Supreme Council decided that she be hanged on a huge chestnut tree as a deterrent for

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<sup>144</sup> Zilfi. *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire*. 43.

<sup>145</sup> Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 100. See also İpşirli-Argit, 'Manumitted Female Slaves of the Ottoman Imperial Harem (Sarayı) in Eighteenth Century Istanbul' Ph.D dissertation, 112-161.

others.<sup>146</sup> This incident was also published on the newspaper called *Ruzname-i Ceride-i Havadis* in December 19, 1861 advising that “everyone should draw a lesson from Zeyneb’s crime and those who are literate should read the punishment reserved for this crime and tell it to the others who cannot read.”<sup>147</sup> We can assume that Derviş Resul’s threat for Zeyneb -if caught she would be slaughtered to set an example to the other slaves (*feryad etmedim seni ibret için kesecekler deyü söylediler*)- was not an intimidation. The threat could be based on a real event, which took place two years ago. Looking from this perspective, we can assume the fear Zeynep had felt in a small cell for five months, how she had lost her hope that she decided to run away from this virtual imprisonment. Rather than returning to her owner’s house, she went to the neighbor’s house. This also implies that she was most probably aware of the punishment that was awaiting her.

In conclusion for this case, I would like to refer back to the first part in which I have raised the question of methodology concerning how much it is possible to hear the voice of these supposedly voiceless actors in history. In recent history writing, there has been a welcome contribution to the difficult task of finding the lost voices and giving them meaning.<sup>148</sup> They all show that there are ways in which we can change and tell the story of slavery. As Türker puts it with reference to Milen V. Petrov:

Every source has its own shortcomings and biases and poses problems to the researcher. Keeping these interpretative problems in mind, I claim that the *nizamiye* court records of the nineteenth century provide the historian with an

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<sup>146</sup> See Aykut-Türker, ‘Alternative Claims on Justice and Law: Rural Arson and Poison Murder in the 19th century Ottoman Empire,’ PhD dissertation, 208-211. Also Dayar, ‘19. Yüzyılda Antalya’da Siyah Köleler ve İbradı’da “Arapastık Kestanesi.”

<sup>147</sup> Aykut-Türker, 211.

<sup>148</sup> For example, Troutt- Powell, *Tell This in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt, Sudan and the Ottoman Empire*. Eva Trout Powell, ‘Will that subaltern ever speak? Finding African slaves in the historiography of the Middle East,’ 242-260. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, 241-261. Erdem, ‘Magic, theft, and arson: the life and death of an enslaved African woman in Ottoman İzmit,’ 125-146. See also Nkwi, *Voicing the Voiceless: Contribution to Closing in Cameroon History*.

invaluable means to reconstruct the Ottoman history that can never be provided by *şer'i* court records. As Milen V. Petrov has stated, these records with interrogation reports –*istintâknâmes*– “contain the first-person narratives of bona fide non-elite social actors, which have proven so elusive in other types of Ottoman sources, including sicil [*Şer'i*] records.”<sup>149</sup>

Being aware of the difficulties, these documents provide us with a useful prism through which we can reach the history of supposed voicelessness of enslaved Africans. In this case, together with the acts that Zeyneb pointed to and her narrative with others like Mahbube and Derviş Resul offers a richly textured picture of how Zeynep came not to accept her fate as a slave. Powell quoting from Spivak that “it is important to acknowledge our complicity in the muting, in order precisely to be more effective on the long run.”<sup>150</sup> As also underlined by Cuno and Walz, enslaved Africans “were not without hopes and dreams, or strategies to lead a life on their own terms”.<sup>151</sup>

The third case of this chapter carries us from the inner part of Anatolia to a city on the island of Crete. Unlike above-mentioned cases, this case involves the crime of murder. The enslaved African man named Sa'id committed a crime to end unrelenting abuse.

### 3.5 Violent reaction to ill-treatment

This case took place in 1846 in *Resmo* (Rethymno), a sub-district on the island of Crete. Said killed a free man named Sinan who was a friend of his holder Ömer.<sup>152</sup>

The case is important in many ways; first, it provides insights into the role of the

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<sup>149</sup> Aykut-Türker, ‘Alternative Claims on Justice and Law: Rural Arson and Poison Murder in the 19th century Ottoman Empire,’ PhD dissertation, 13-14. Quotation from Petrov, ‘Tanzimat for the Countryside: Midhat Paşa and the Vilayet of Danube, 1864-1868,’ Ph.D dissertation, 267.

<sup>150</sup> Troutt- Powell, ‘Will That Subaltern Ever Speak? Findings African Slaves in the Historiography of MiddleEasti,’ 244.

<sup>151</sup> Walz and Cuno, ‘Introduction,’ 4.

<sup>152</sup> BOA., MVL 37/45,1263 Za 3 (13 October 1847) BOA., A. DVN18/36, 1262 Ş 14 (5 October 1846).

attachment between a master and an enslaved person. Plus, it helps us to understand dynamics of a court case, which involves the *cinâyet* (murder) offense. In Islamic law two kinds of punishment were usually demanded in the cases of proven homicide or bodily harm: retaliation (*kisas*) and blood money (*diyet*). In the Şeriat courts, which were the main organ of the justice system in this case, the system regarded the master as responsible for paying the blood money. The same law also granted masters a right to abandon his slave in order to get rid of the responsibility of paying blood money.

To begin with, I will relate what happened in the house of Ömer on the night of the murder. Ömer and his friends gathered at the house of the former. In the midst of their conversation Ömer asked his friend Mazlum to find Said in order to make him buy some more beverages. Having coming back to home with Mazlum, Said demanded his sale from Ömer; and this request resulted in Sinan's attack upon Said. According to Said's testimony:

At that night when Mazlum found me and brought me to the house of Ömer, Ömer and Sinan were sitting together. Since my master used to order others to beat me, I targeted him and said that you always order someone to beat me even though you have no right to do it, so sell me. Then, Sinan pitched into me and punched me by sitting on my chest so I stabbed him and he died three days later.<sup>153</sup>

After this explanation Sa'id agreed that he killed Sinan intentionally (*amden*). After this confession, regular bureaucratic procedures were followed. As in all murder cases, the victim's heirs expected to opt for either a death penalty or financial compensation. However, as Omri Paz points out several conditions must be fulfilled

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<sup>153</sup> BOA., MVL 37/45: 'İylen beni Mazlum bulup haneye götürdüğünde merkûm Sinan ağam Ömer ile beraber oturup ve ağam merkûm Ömer her vakit beni şuna buna darp ettirir olduğundan binaenaleyh ben dahi Ömer'e hitaben her vakit beni bi-gayri hakkın darp etmeğe şuna buna tenbih edersin beni fûruht eyle dediğimde merkûm Sinan yerinden kalkıp üzerime hücum ve aşağı atıp yumruk ile darp etmeye başlayup göğsüme oturup yumruk ile darp etmekte olduğundan ben dahi yanımda bulunan bıçak ile kasten darp ve cerh eyledim.'

so as to carry out the first choice, a capital punishment. Most importantly, the killing must be intentional rather than wrongfully causing the death of another person. Secondly, all legal heirs of the victim must agree on retaliation without exception.<sup>154</sup> These two vital conditions were met for Said's murder. The legal heirs of Sinan, including the parents, wife and the little daughter, had agreed upon retaliation for the deceased at first. However, within a short period of time, they renounced retaliation and chose the blood money. The father of the deceased justified his change of mind on the assumption that a dead slave was no use for the heirs. Plus, the deceased was heavily in debt. For this reason, the father suggested that if Ömer agreed to pay 2000 *kuruş*, they would come to an amicable agreement.<sup>155</sup> The remarkable aspect of this case, in my view, lies in the reason of the master's rejection of any responsibility towards Said. As I have indicated above, slaveholders had this right of disavowal; he refused to pay blood money demanded by the heirs. Then, the heirs again returned to their first agreement on the retaliation.

Here I need to register a note of what Toledano calls the enslaver-enslaved relationship, as the master-slave dyad. According to him, this dyadic aspect of the relationship played a significant role in the lives of the enslaved. He asserts:

The dyad was dynamic, tested and renegotiated daily by both sides as the content and the nature of the exchange were being determined or dictated and the boundaries drawn. In the context of unquestionable exploitation, however, there had to exist a certain level of trust, which depended on the quality of the bond achieved between the parties. As the ingredients of the "deal" and the "rules of the game" were defined, expectations were also set and the level of abuse calibrated. Accumulated breaches of the rules could result in the enslaved person feeling betrayed, sensing that the relationship was breaking down.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>154</sup>Paz, 'Crime and Criminals and the Ottoman State, Anatolia between the late 1830s and the late 1860s,' 145-146.

<sup>155</sup> BOA., MVL 37/45: 'merkûm İbrahim meclis-i şer'i bil-ihzar katil merkûm kısâs olunduğu halde buna vasair vereseyle bir faide hasil olmayacağından ve maktûl müteveffanın vafir derunu olup katili merkûm Sa'id'in mevlâsı merkûm Ömer bizlere iki bin kuruş verdikte Arab'ını almak üzere sulh olacağımızdan bu vechle sulh oluruz demiş'

<sup>156</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 60.

The case points at a relationship that was based largely on the master's abuse of Said. And it was so fragile that it is possible to expect it to collapse. By the rejection of paying blood money Ömer was the one who ended the dyad and left his slave to die. When the heirs pushed him to pay, he offered the heirs to sell Said to meet the necessary money.<sup>157</sup> Here, in this example, we are presented by a ruthless master who not only got Said beaten up by others but also showed no pity or compassion for his slave. Said was not an exception, Evren Dayar also enumerates cases in which the masters took advantage of their slaves' vulnerable positions.<sup>158</sup> On the other hand, we know other examples, for instance, another master of an enslaved man named Reyhan who was eager to pay five hundred *kuruş* in order to save his slave from the fate of the gallows, which was the punishment given to Reyhan for arson.<sup>159</sup> These examples themselves are important indicators to show us the role of the masters in the lives of the people. Said must have been aware that the relationship was breaking down, for this reason, rather than seeking to abscond, he asked his holder to sell him to another person. He must have been aware of the fact that he had this right since one of the injunctions of the Prophet states that "those whom you like, retain; and those whom you dislike, sell."<sup>160</sup> Said also claimed in the court that the master had no right to get him beaten. These two articulations could be read as a sign of Said's agency. On the other hand, his request of another master confirms the recent observation of an author who states, "when slaves took action, it was likely to be in

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<sup>157</sup> BOA., MVL 37/45: 'merkûm Ömer bir bab vermeğe razı olmayıp katil zenci Sa'id'i alsunlar fûruht etsinler'

<sup>158</sup> See the cases examined in his article: BOA.İ.MVL.384-16788, BOA.İ.MVL.468-21240, BOA.İ.MVL.707-66. Dayar, '19. Yüzyılda Antalya'da Siyah Köleler ve İbradı'da "Arapastık Kestanesi.'"

<sup>159</sup> Aykut- Türker, 'Alternative Claims on Justice and Law: Rural Arson and Poison Murder in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire,' Ph. D dissertation, 192.

<sup>160</sup> Hunwick and Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam*, 8.



search of refuge from abuse, of amelioration, perhaps even of a ‘better’ master rather than in the pursuit of abstract liberty.”<sup>161</sup>

Returning to the mechanism of the courts, we know that the heirs opted for retaliation in their confrontation in the *kadı* court of Rethymino. Judge sent this document to MVAA, the grand vizier demanded further interrogation reports, which means that he did not approve the heirs’ demand of retaliation. Then the father of the deceased was called to the court again and persuaded to accept blood money. He changed his mind, agreed to receive blood money by promising to persuade the other heirs. But this option was rejected by the master Ömer, who said that he would not give anything as blood money since he rejected his ties with his slave. As Said was aware of his own rights, Ömer was also knowledgeable on Islamic laws which granted him the right to abandon his slave in order to get rid of the obligation to the pay the blood money.<sup>162</sup> After master’s rejection, İbrahim and other heirs again demanded the retaliation, but Grand Vezier did not give any ratification, again. Documents in the file do not speak anymore concerning the decision. However we know from other cases that the state in general did not encourage retaliation.<sup>163</sup>

This case, even without a conclusion, offers us a tool to gain insight into the functioning of both *kadı* court and *meclis* of Rethymino since it includes a document written by both *kadı* and member of *meclis*. For the local actors in the case, we can safely conclude that their common concern was based on their financial advantages. In the eyes of both the master and heirs, Said was considered to be human property. If one tries to imagine the life of Said under the light of the information the case provided us, the picture was dark beyond any doubt. He was subjected to violence by

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<sup>161</sup> Cronin, ‘Islam, slave agency and abolitionism in Iran, the Middle East and North Africa,’ 962.

<sup>162</sup> Fendoğlu, *İslâm ve Osmanlı Hukukunda Kölelik ve Cârîyelik- Kamu Hukuku açısından Mukayeseli Bir İnceleme*, 190.

<sup>163</sup> Paz, ‘Crime and Criminals and the Ottoman State: Anatolia between the late 1830s and the late 1860s,’ Ph.D dissertation, 146.

various actors with the command of his master. His solution also leads us to another sobering part of his life story; he wanted to be sold in order to escape his master's cruelty without knowing what kind of conditions awaited him in the hands of a new master. This case proves that what *Şeriat* granted in theory became useless in practice.

In what follows I shall present the last case of this chapter, in which a nameless African slave was killed by his master. Different from Said's case, this enslaved man dared to escape from the bondage like the first two enslaved Africans mentioned earlier in the chapter but he had to pay for his action with his life.

### 3.6 Mansion of the ignominy

The last case will carry us the Hijaz providence of the empire. The events narrated in the documents took place in the city of Jeddah on the Red Sea coast where enslavement was proved to be harsher in comparison to other parts of the empire. As I have stated, the Hijaz providence had to be exempted from the prohibition of African slave trade owing to the uprisings. This case at hand also contributed to the fact that enslaved people in this region suffered a lot at the hands of their masters. Take an example of the master of this case, Yusuf, who clubbed his slave to death and buried him on a place within his mansion in 1858.<sup>164</sup> This case presents the extreme cruelty of the slaveholder, but also points out an inner conflict between the *kadı* and zealous governor of Jeddah, *vali-yi eyâlet-i Cidde*, as well as the members of the court in the decision making part.

When the interrogator asked Yusuf concerning the reason behind the death of his slave, he answered that his slave had escaped from the mansion two days before

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<sup>164</sup> BOA.MVL 753/27 5 S 1275(14 September 1858).

his death and returned ill from the prison and this illness caused his natural death.<sup>165</sup> Second question concerned the burial of the corpse within the household instead of the neighborhood cemetery. This time Yusuf replied that he was afraid of possible gossip, which could imply that his slave died from the beating.<sup>166</sup> His answer must have confused the interrogators. Owing to this confusion and anxious outlook of Yusuf's wife, the interrogators applied to Yusuf's wife's testimony for a second time. Some of the *meclis* members of Jeddah who got help from some mediators to reach the wife had questioned her again. At that moment her confession clarified the reason behind the so far suspicious death; according to her testimony this deceased slave had escaped two days before his death, which proves what her husband shared with interrogators. However, her later testimony revealed that after returning from the Morning Prayer, Yusuf had awakened the helpless slave and started to beat him in order to discipline him for his escape attempt. While Yusuf's wife was trying to warn her husband against his brutality, the husband started to come for his wife, swearing at her at the same time. She continued her testimony that her husband's pounding must have targeted the sensitive part of slave's body that left him out of breath. When the couple came closer to him, the wife said that he was dead and the husband replied to her by saying it was just fate<sup>167</sup>. An appalling part of the story comes from the wife's ongoing testimony regarding the involvement of Yusuf's

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<sup>165</sup> BOA.MVL 753/27 5 S 1275(14 September 1858): 'zenci-i merkûmun birkaç gün evvel firar edüb hapishanede keyifsiz olmasıyla konağına götürdüğünde eccl-i mev'udesiyle fevt olduğunu tezkâr eylemesi.'

<sup>166</sup> BOA.MVL 753/27 5 S 1275: 'altı aylık bir çocuk mütevellid olsa mezaristan nakli lazime-i halden iken gulam-ı merkum niçün hanende defin eyledin deyü tekrar sual kılındıkta darb ile helak olmuş derler deyü havfımdan kimesneye ifşâ etmeyerek dikkat eyledim deyü verdiği cevab'

<sup>167</sup> BOA.MVL 753/27 5 S 1275: 'Naime Hanım'ın ifadesi şöyle ki köle-i merkum iki gün akdem firar eylemiş olduğundan te'dib eylemek üzere zevcem Yusuf Ramazan-ı şerifin beşinci cuma gecesini sabah namazından geldikten sonra köleyi uykudan kaldırdı lubud(?) ile darba başladıkta aman yahu ölüverir deyü şifa'at eylediğimde bana şetm [küfretme] edüb darb etmeğe başladı ben kaçtım abdî darb ederken fena bir mahale tesadüf ederek nefesi kesildiğinde yanına varub gördüm ki ölmüş kendisi dahi bakar idi abd vefat etti dedim bana mukadder dedi'

other slave called Mebrûk. Yusuf made Mebrûk to bury the dead slave in the mansion. This testimony captures, I think, the extreme cruelty of Yusuf towards his slaves. It is hard to resist asking a question concerning the feeling of Mebrûk who had to bury his companion. He might have been frightened in terms of what was waiting for him and felt desperate and helpless because of his inability.

We learn from the document that his wife had gone to her neighbor and narrated the event and the neighbor spread the word so that others uncovered the corpse from the mansion. This event came eventually to the ears of authorities that they did not hesitate to initiate an investigation. Apart from Sinan's wife testimony, the authorities applied the testimonies of two other people who were engaged in the bathing the deceased. They revealed that the victim had bruises on different parts of his body. *Meclis* members and the governor state in the document that Yusuf killed his slave without any doubt in this mansion of ignominy (*fezâhat konağı*). When Yusuf found himself in front of the *Şeriat* court, he stated that his slave had returned ill from the prison and died a natural death as a result. The file contained the *şeri* judicial degree (*ilâm*) that *kadı* did not find the master guilty due to the lack of enough eyewitnesses. We should register a note here that in *Şeriat* courts a case must be proved theoretically in one of the two ways: by a valid testimony of two Muslim male eyewitnesses or by a willing confession of the accused.<sup>168</sup> Since this case met neither of the two requirements, *kadı* concluded that the culprit had to receive corporal punishment (*ta'zir*). But *meclis* members and the governor has no intentions to give up, thereby they forwarded the case to the MVAA to punish the culprit according to the article 174 in the Ottoman Penal Code of 1858. With reference to this article of the Penal Code, they demanded that if a person has killed an individual

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<sup>168</sup> Paz, 'Crime and Criminals and the Ottoman State: Anatolia between the late 1830s and the late 1860s,' Ph.D Dissertation, 125.

without premeditation he must be placed in *kürek* (hard labor) for a period of fifteen years.<sup>169</sup> With luck, I found another file, which includes the verdict of the case.<sup>170</sup> It proves that the zealous members of the *meclis* won what we can call with today's terminology their legal struggle against the cruel slaveholder.

We can draw several conclusions from this case. Here, it would not be wrong to assume that we are presented what Toledano calls “patron-state” in which the Tanzimat state assumed the role of a patron vis-à-vis the enslaved. In this example, reform-oriented *meclis* members and governor fought against the *kadi*'s verdict, which granted almost no punishment for the culprit. Here what is important is that the state used this newly promulgated penal code to punish a free man against a (dead) man who had a slave status. For this case we can conclude that the law was applicable for all members of the society without differentiating between their status. When we take the geography into consideration, the case also confirms what Toledano claims in his writings: “the farther from the core and the less densely populated the habitat, the greater the chances the enslaved had to receive bad treatment.”<sup>171</sup> And we also know that application of reforms might have altered between the core and periphery. For example, when the Ottoman Empire tried to suppress the African slave trade, “the Red Sea and Hijaz traffic would prove most difficult to suppress so much so that when the general prohibition of the slave trade in Africans was issued in 1857, the Hijaz was recognized as a special case to be

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<sup>169</sup> BOA.MVL 753/27 5 S 1275: ‘kanunu cedidenin yüz yetmiş dördüncü maddesinde bir kimse min-gayr-ı taammüd bir şahıs itilâf etmiş ise on beş sene müddetle küreğe vaz’ olunur deyü muharrer bulunduğuna canib’ For 1858 Penal Code Article 174 see Bucknill and Utidjian, *The Imperial Ottoman Penal Code*. It states that ‘Art. 174. 1 — If a person has killed an individual without premeditation he is placed in *kürek* for a period of fifteen years; but if this matter of destruction of life has taken place while committing another *Jinayet* either before the commission or after the commission, or for the sake of committing a *Junha*, the person destroying life is punished with the punishment of death according to law.’

<sup>170</sup> BOA., MVL 753/27 08 S 1276 ( 29 August 1859).

<sup>171</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 15.

exempted from the prohibition.”<sup>172</sup> One year later with the promulgation of a new penal code, the state was able to apply its laws against the pro-slave holding province. Thereby, it would not be wrong to conclude that the members of the *meclis* were trying their best by using a newly promulgated criminal code to punish the culprit in spite of his free status.

Returning to the life of this enslaved man, we cannot hear his voice but his death speaks louder than many words. Although we don't know much about the reason behind his escape attempt or what thwarted him to succeed in reaching his freedom, it is clear that he must have failed at some point and had to return to his holder's mansion, what the governor prefers to call the mansion of the ignominy (*fezâhat konağı*). We could derive from Yusuf's brutality that the deceased enslaved could have experienced beatings before and for this reason he might have resorted to absconding. But what is certain that he demanded a life independent from his holder and that this resulted in his brutal death.

To conclude this chapter, one should keep in his/her mind that these four cases have been selected out of a larger pool of the archival documents for reasons of interest, merit and narrative advantage of the cases. These enslaved men and women in the cases were exposed to different kinds of physical and psychological violence but had their own rather limited strategies to end the violence in bondage by getting rid of it in different ways. The chapter also proves that slaveholders could easily violate Islamic laws in practice by prioritizing their economic advantages. But here we should also register a note on vernacularization in the treatment of slaves. For instance, some slaveholders could be more humanitarian while others extremely cruel in their treatment of the slaves. Besides, these cases confirm that the transition

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<sup>172</sup> Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression: 1840-1890*, 137.

from slavery to freedom was not very smooth. Their disgraced condition enables us to understand the brutality of slavery, which has so long been silenced and suppressed in the documented history.

As stated in the beginning of the thesis, I have endeavored to demonstrate how different modes of writing can be used as tools to reveal tenable method to tell enslaved Africans stories. The next chapter is going to explore life segments of an enslaved African eunuch who had succeeded in becoming a very close companion of Sultan Abdülhamid II. By revealing how this man fell into the evil of slavery, I aim to show his life under bondage then “forced freedom.” Throughout this chapter, I have dealt with enslaved people who ranked within non-elite groups. In contrast to this chapter, the next one will focus on an enslaved African person who belongs to the category of *kul/harem* slavery, a term which I will explain below.

## CHAPTER 4

### NADIR AGHA: THE LIFE OF A BLACK EUNUCH

As I have stated in the introduction, my overarching agenda throughout the thesis is to present a variety of settings and mobilize a variety of methods of inquiry to shed light on the experiences of enslaved Africans, in order to show that enslavement in the Ottoman Empire was not benign, as it has been narrated in conventional history writing. In the previous chapter, I showed the harshness of enslavement by way of a close reading of different court cases. Now, I base this chapter on biographical data of Sultan Abdülhamid II's black eunuch, Nadir Agha. Although eunuchs played an important role in the history of the Ottoman Empire, almost all of them remained lost in history. For this very reason, Nadir Agha's memory is important not only for giving us a tool to uncover his own version of the enslavement narrative but also detailing his capture in Abyssinia, today's Ethiopia, his voyage into the Ottoman land, his service in the palace and his freedom. Before going into his life story, I will discuss the term *kul/harem* slavery and the importance of biographies as historical source material.

#### 4.1 *Kul/Harem* slavery: elite slaves

In general terms, *kul/harem* slavery denotes military-administrative type of enslavement and black eunuchs and white concubines are considered within this category since they were parts and parcels of *harems* and elite households.<sup>173</sup> Here, the term is important since it paves the way for historians to assert that these slaves lived in a relatively high comfort in elite households or harems.<sup>174</sup> The term carries

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<sup>173</sup> Toledano, 'Kul/Harem Slavery, The Men, The Women, the Eunuchs,' 20-54.

<sup>174</sup> In the literature survey section of the thesis, I have dealt with those historians who prefer to use



an important weight in the hands of Ottoman intellectuals and leading statesmen as well since they used this type of slavery for their bifurcated arguments on representation of slavery in the empire. To discuss this bifurcated image, I will refer to two articles written by Toledano and Karamürsel respectively. Toledano, in his essay, claims that Ottoman intellectuals (he categorizes them into three main groups), embraced kul/harem slavery towards Westerners by highlighting its mild form in comparison to plantation slavery. On the other hand, at home they accepted domestic and agricultural slavery as the *only* type of slavery.<sup>175</sup> In their eyes kul/harem enslavers were members of the elite and could not be associated with other forms of slavery in the Americas or lower ranked slaves at home. By using this justification, the Ottomans impeded the suppression of the trade in Caucasian slaves until the era of the Young Turks. By attributing the evil sides of slavery to “another world - one that was uncivilized, unruly, and beyond their control”<sup>176</sup>, they also closed their eyes to the sufferings of slave trade and the lot of African menial slaves. This disturbed and internalized benign view of slavery by intellectuals resulted in a strong resistance against abolition of slavery in the long run throughout “procedures of selection, deletion, and amplification.”<sup>177</sup> Karamürsel, through a careful reading of archival records regarding the parliament, evaluates the proposal suggested by Yorga Boşo Efendi, a statesman in the parliament. What Boşo Efendi demanded in his proposal was to ban the purchase and sale of individuals, but his proposal met with “more objection than support and was eventually rejected by the majority of

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other terms rather the word slave to refer kul/harem slaves. See the literature survey section.

<sup>175</sup> Toledano, ‘Late Ottoman Concept of Slavery (1830-1880s),’ 477-505.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 494.

<sup>177</sup> Ibid., 503-504.

parliamentarians, most of whom believed that slavery no longer existed in the Ottoman Empire, and if it did, it was merely due to a violation of penal and *Şer'i* law.”<sup>178</sup>

This example captures not only the ignorance of Ottoman intellectuals regarding enslavement but also the way they justified their actions. In their eyes slavery in the Ottoman Empire was benign and *kul/harem* slavery was a path to the elite life. This view is also shared by foreign observers of the time who were fed to some degree this body of hearsay and fantasy. The words of Charles White illustrate this image very well. For him “slavery is often the road to the highest honors.”<sup>179</sup> Ponsonby, the British ambassador to Istanbul, was also of the same opinion with White, namely that enslaved people enjoyed “the highest dignities, the greatest power, and largest share of wealth of any person in the empire.”<sup>180</sup> Spending some twenty years in the empire as consul’s wife Lady Blunt also writes in her book that the slave system in Turkey is widely different from the system of American slavery, one of her reasons is based on manumission papers, which slaves usually gained after seven years of bondage.<sup>181</sup>

Observations made by both foreign and local observers on Ottoman slavery are debated in the works of Erdem and Toledano in a detailed way, and I will also give further examples in the next chapter. This chapter is written from the invaluable perspective of a slave narrative, which give us a tool to follow personal histories. Having clarified these things, I will now, touch upon the importance of biographical data as a historical source and its importance in understanding slavery in the Ottoman Empire.

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<sup>178</sup> Karamürsel, ‘The Uncertainties of Freedom: The Second Constitutional Era and the End of Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire,’ 154.

<sup>179</sup> White, *Three Years in Constantinople; or Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1844*, 305-6.

<sup>180</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, 73.

<sup>181</sup> Blunt, *The People of Turkey*, 149-150.

## 4.2 Biography as a historical source material

An important historian Carolyn Steedman, the author of *The Everyday Life of The English Working Class*, writes a propos of her biographical writing: “I want what I have written to be called history, and not autobiography”<sup>182</sup> and she claims that “once a story is told, it ceases to be a story: it becomes a piece of history, an interpretive devise”.<sup>183</sup> State archives provide invaluable tools but at the same time they restrict and limit scholars. As we have seen in our earlier methodological discussion, according to Ferguson and Toledano:

Another major theme in the historiography of Ottoman enslavement is that much of it is based on state archival sources, most notably central and provincial archives, and various European, especially British, consular archives. State documents inevitably reflect the view of the administration, but a careful reading of them, particularly *Şeriat* and Nizami court records, can reveal enslaved voices and experience. Additionally, it appears that private papers and personal memoirs can be used to incorporate the life stories of the enslaved and enslaver.<sup>184</sup>

In the understanding of Ottoman slavery from the point of enslaved Africans, court records and personal memoirs provide insightful tools by completing each other's gaps. But one should be careful in not to take for granted these sources as sources of absolute truth; rather they should be treated as reservoirs of stories that historians use to construct out of detritus of people's lives usually left outside the history writing. Here, one should also register a note concerning “reliability” of source material. In his writing on first-person narratives in Ottoman literature, Kafadar points out a dualist schema between courtly and popular tradition inherited in Ottoman literary history<sup>185</sup>. The perception of biographies as a source material falls into the latter category, which implies secondary class material in comparison to

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<sup>182</sup> Steedman, ‘History and Autobiography: Different Pasts,’ 50.

<sup>183</sup> Steedman, *Landscape for a God Women: A Story of Two Lives*, 143.

<sup>184</sup> Ferguson and Toledano, ‘Ottoman Slavery and Abolition in the Nineteenth Century,’ 198.

<sup>185</sup> Kafadar, ‘Self and Others: The Diary of Dervish in the Seventeenth-Century Istanbul. First Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature,’ 121-2.

materials that emanated from the courtly tradition. But this tendency, as it has shown by Kafadar and Faroqhi, has altered with the changing characteristics of history writing.<sup>186</sup>

Biographical accounts are also specifically important in the histories of slavery. In his article on biography as source material, Lovejoy points out that

In studying slavery and the slave trade, biography can capture the detail of history. Personal accounts, even if recorded second-hand, can contain valuable information on material culture, customs, and prestige of slavery. By re-inserting individuals into the reality of slavery, biographies put flesh on the bones of the past.<sup>187</sup>

In the context of Ottoman slavery, Toledano first underlines the importance of Nadir Agha's biography by emphasizing the research potential inherent in these sources. As we will see, and Toledano stresses that these sources are helpful in filling the gaps concerning the lives of enslaved in Africa and after their capture. Besides Nadir Agha's account, we have few published accounts with biographical data of the enslaved Africans in the empire. Jane Hathaway's *Beshir Agha: Chief Eunuch of the Imperial Harem* stands out as the first and important biographical account written about an enslaved African eunuch.<sup>188</sup> We have also Ahmed Resmî Efendi's book; it lists the chief black eunuchs from Mehmed Agha up to Moralı Beşir Agha (between 1574-1752).<sup>189</sup> It contains short biographies of thirty-eight eunuchs. Another important work comes from Toledano's earlier writings, focusing on the 1903 register of imperial eunuch's biographies. The register lists 194 biographies and contains information on the date of eunuchs' registration, the province they came

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<sup>186</sup> See: Kafadar, 'Self and Others: The Diary of Dervish in the Seventeenth-Century Istanbul. First Person Narratives in Ottoman Literature.' Faroqhi, "Civilian Society and Political Power in the Ottoman Empire: A Report on Research in Collective Biography (1480-1830)," 109-117.

<sup>187</sup> Lovejoy, 'Biography as Source Material: Towards a Biographical Archive of Enslaved Africans,' 119.

<sup>188</sup> Hathaway, *Beshir Agha Chief Eunuch of Ottoman Imperial Harem*.

<sup>189</sup> Ahmed Resmi Efendi, *Hamîletü'l Küberâ*.

from, the way of entering the Palace either through purchase or as a gift.<sup>190</sup> There is also a recently published book titled *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of Power in the Court of the Sultan* by George Junne.<sup>191</sup> In his book, he also uses the inventory of 1893, which consists of the entry dates and biographies of the eunuch servants of the imperial harem. These biographies vary in length but they are not more than two pages. Plus, these biographical data do not provide any information on how and from where in Africa these eunuchs were captured but Nadir Agha's account presents a detailed picture of capture and journey into Ottoman lands.

By reading Nadir Agha's own narrative, I aim to open a window into the life of an enslaved and castrated African person, who was named Nadir by his former mistress. The previous chapter, I have shown the predicament of bondage in the lives of ordinary slaves. Here, shifting my focus on elite slavery, Nadir Agha's narrative enables us to capture a life story of a free person before bondage but also draw a portrait of his life after gaining the so-called "freedom."

Now I will attempt to present a life story of Nadir Agha (c.1870-1957), highlighting various aspects of his life from the lands of Abyssinia to the Ottoman Palace in which he became one of the most significant eunuchs of Sultan Abdülhamid II until the deposition of the Sultan to Thessalonica in 1909. During his service in the Palace, Nadir Agha won the affections of the Sultan and became one of his close companions, and therefore gained the title of *musâhib*<sup>192</sup> (companion). His life story, which did not start in the Palace, did not end there either. With the

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<sup>190</sup> Toledano, 'The Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul: From Africa to the Hearth of Islam,' 379-390.

<sup>191</sup> Junne, *The Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of the Power in the Courts of the Sultan*. I would also like to thank Prof. George Junne for being so generous to share his knowledge of black eunuchs.

<sup>192</sup> مصاحب *musâhib*: Who keeps company with another; hence, (T), a gentleman in waiting on the Sultan; usually selected for his wit and power to amuse. Redhouse, *A Turkish and English Lexicon Shewing in English the Signification of Turkish Terms*, 1874.

dethronement of the Sultan by the Young Turks, Cevher Agha, the chief *musâhib* was executed whereas Nadir Agha found himself imprisoned. Nonetheless, Nadir Agha was pardoned by the Young Turk cabinet for having shown them the location of the ex-sultan's treasury. Due to his agile mind and amazing ability to escape unscratched from the trial conducted by the Young Turks, he stepped into his new 'free' life outside the Palace walls, leaving his memoirs and interviews behind.

Nadir Agha had dictated his memoir, which had been put down to paper by a headman of the neighborhood he lived in. This memoir had been preserved by a family that had some links with a professor who had bought Nadir Agha's pavilion. One member of this family transcribed the text into Turkish alphabet and another family member, who had the chance to meet Nadir Agha during his childhood years, published it in one of the Turkish magazines in two parts without any critical edition in 1998.<sup>193</sup> Apart from his memoirs, we also have two interviews, one of which had been conducted immediately before his death in 1957 and the other in 1934.<sup>194</sup> Last but not least, the archival documents and other memoirs of his contemporaries provide a tool for displaying various aspects of his life.

Unlike available slave narratives in the States<sup>195</sup>, we are virtually left in the dark concerning Ottoman slave narratives.<sup>196</sup> Nadir Agha's struggle for survival,

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<sup>193</sup> Throughout the article, I will use his Memoirs as the main source of his narrative, but I will give references to other works if other versions are available. Ertuğ, 'Musahib-i sani Hazret-i Şehryari Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-I,' 7-15. Hasan Ferit Ertuğ, 'Musahib-i sani Hazret-i Şehryari Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-II,' 6-14.

<sup>194</sup> See respectively, 'Nadir Ağa', *Hayat*, 6-7. Çapanoğlu, 'Abdülhamid'in En Yakın Adamı Nadir Ağa Eski Efendisi İçin Neler Söylüyor,' 19, 21 and 29.

<sup>195</sup> As Paul Lovejoy states in the case of slave narratives in the Americas 'What has survived and in what form varied enormously. We are fortunate that hundreds, perhaps several thousands of such accounts have survived, some very short and some fully developed biographies, often autobiographical.' Lovejoy, 'Freedom Narratives' of Transatlantic Slavery,' 93.

<sup>196</sup> Studies in Egypt and Islamic Middle East have recently begun to amend this omission through literary strategies as well as innovative methodologies. See, Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in The Islamic Middle East*. Toledano, 'Shemsigül: A Circassian Slave in Mid-Nineteenth Century Cairo,' 59-74. Erdem, 'Magic, theft and arson: the life and death of an enslaved African woman in Ottoman Izmit,' 125-146. Troutt-Powell, *Tell this in My Memory: Stories of Enslavement from Egypt Sudan and Ottoman Empire*. Troutt-Powell, 'Will that subaltern ever speak?

which had begun in Africa and continued in the Palace, contributes a particular story for slavery studies focusing on the Ottoman Empire. Unfortunately, studies of eunuchs and *musâhib* also constitute one of the lacunas, which require further attention by Ottomanists.<sup>197</sup> As a pioneer scholar of slavery studies in the Ottoman Empire, Toledano also underlines the research potential of biographies in spite of their filtered nature. The lives of the slaves in Africa and their capture are still gaps that need to be addressed by slavery studies in the Ottoman Empire.<sup>198</sup>

#### 4.3 Voyage to Ottoman lands

Nadir Agha must have been born around the 1870s in Abyssinia, known as Galla-land<sup>199</sup>. Cengiz Orhonlu also confirms the fact that the majority of slaves coming from Abyssinia belonged to the region of Galla.<sup>200</sup> Pankhurst, an expert in the study of Ethiopia, acknowledges that the early 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period when exports of slaves from the Abyssinian region have been estimated at no less than 25,000 per annum. According to Blondeel, who quotes from official figures, there were 600 people exported from Abyssinia mainly Gallas, of whom he thought about 100 to be eunuchs.<sup>201</sup> Like many names of other enslaved Africans, Nadir Agha's original Abyssinian name is unknown. His first mistress named the young eunuch Nadir after

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Finding African slaves in the historiography of the Middle East.'

<sup>197</sup> See, Toledano, 'The Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul: From Africa to Heart of Islam,' 79-390. For the biography of the chief harem eunuch see, Hathaway, *Beshir Agha Chief Eunuch of Ottoman Imperial Harem*. On the short and descriptive biographies of thirty-seven African eunuchs imperial harem (1574-1752), see, Ahmed Resmi Efenndi, *Hamîletü'l-Küberâ*.

<sup>198</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in The Islamic Middle East*, 57.

<sup>199</sup> In the first part of the Memoirs, he states that his native land is *Galle*, part of Abyssinia and his birthplace is a county town named *Gümebadula*. On the other hand, in his last interview, he acknowledges that he is from a village named *Limnu*, located in the southernmost corner of Abyssinia. According to Mahir Şaul, Nadir Agha belonged to an ethnic group named the Oromo who are one of the Cushitic-speaking groups of people with variations in color and physical characteristics ranging from Hamitic to Nilotic. Respectively, Ertuğ, 'Musahib-i sanî Hazret-i Şehryari Nadir Ağa'nın Hatıratı-I,' 7. *Hayat*, 60. Şaul, 'Geçmişten Bugüne Siyah Afrika'dan Türkiye'ye Göçler: Kölelikten Küresel Girişimciliğe,' 10.

<sup>200</sup> Orhonlu, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti: Habeş Eyaleti*, 102.

<sup>201</sup> Pankhurst, 'The Ethiopian Slave Trade in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century: A Statistical Inquiry,' 224 and 228.

the previous eunuch of hers. While describing his childhood period, we are informed that he had one elder brother and an elder sister who took care of him.<sup>202</sup> He continues narrating that he lost his father in one of the raids while he was able to save his life with severe injuries when he was 6 or 7 years old. His mother had passed away even before the death of his father. After a while, he was kidnapped by a slave raider this time but was able to escape from the house of the raider while falling into the hands of a slave trader the second time at the age of 8 or 9 who would carry him into the lands of Ottomans. Before arriving at the Ottoman Empire, he went through a journey to meet his first mistress. While travelling with the raider, the numbers of kidnapped Africans were increasing step by step until they arrived at the port. Without knowing the exact duration of this journey, he acknowledged that it must have lasted days and nights through jungles and salt lakes.<sup>203</sup> When the children got tired, raiders put them on mules and when they arrived at the salt lakes they made the children put sandals on their feet and put masks on their mouths. According to his narration, this journey through the salt lakes took place during the night while they were resting under canvas during the daytime. And he adds that the raiders selected isolated places intentionally since they were afraid of being captured by commanders who were obliged to follow slave raiders.<sup>204</sup> This information confirms what Toledano states regarding the trade routes: “the longer, more difficult routes taken by slave dealers in order to avoid foreign observers and Ottoman officials increased the

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<sup>202</sup> On the other hand, in the interview, he states he had two sisters younger than him. *Hayat*, 60.

<sup>203</sup> Most probably, he went through Lake Abbe bar from his hometown to Djibouti since it is located in the middle of the journey, most likely used as a slavery route. See also, Orhonlu, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti: Habeş Eyaleti*, 102.

<sup>204</sup> Most probably, they were afraid of being captured since the general prohibition of the black slave trade took place in 1857. But Erdem also acknowledges that despite the *Şeri* injunctions and new legislation of the reform era, kidnapping, especially on an individual, small-scale level continued in the Ottoman Empire for a long time since there was a demand for slaves. See Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise 1800-1909*, 47 and 107.



suffering of the slaves and raises the death toll.”<sup>205</sup> During their journey, they were fed with rice in small quantities; a cup of rice for two children. Nadir Agha states explicitly he would never forget this. After they arrived in Djibouti where he witnessed the tide<sup>206</sup>, they sailed towards the port of Jidda, according to Nadir Agha’s assumption<sup>207</sup> During the journey, the children had to stay in the stowage where they were suffering from seasickness.<sup>208</sup> After their arrival, they went on camels towards the center of Mecca, a journey that lasted 18 hours on camelback. Nadir underlines that slave traders could walk calmly since slavery went usually uncontrolled there. In the market of Mecca, the trader could not find a customer for him because he looked too thin and weak, so the trader fed him with oil without any result. Eventually, he was purchased by an upper class lady who named him after her former slave whom she had sent off to the Ottoman Palace before Nadir’s arrival. This articulation of his corroborates the second literature at hand: “Women of upper class were also involved privately in the lucrative and highly selective trade in eunuchs”<sup>209</sup> and she was probably one of them. When was he made a eunuch? During the next three years Nadir was taught Arabic in the house of this woman. An Ottoman sheriff named Avnüreffi<sup>210</sup> then sent him to the Palace upon the request of the Sultan who asked for Abyssinian eunuchs.<sup>211</sup> They sailed towards Istanbul. The journey lasted for months since they stopped at different ports in order to recruit

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<sup>205</sup> Toledano, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression 1840-1890*, 12.

<sup>206</sup> One can acknowledge that the tides in Djibouti are common natural events.

<sup>207</sup> As Toledano states Jidda was then a Red Sea slaving port and one of the main gateways to the Hijaz and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in The Islamic Middle East*, 117.

<sup>208</sup> For the detailed explanation of the type sailing boat called *zambuk* used in Persian Gulf for slave trade see: Korkmaz, ‘XX Yüzyıl Başlarında Kızıldeniz’de Osmanlı Denizcilik Faaliyetleri,’ Unpublished MA thesis, 48.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>210</sup> Avnüreffi became the Sheriff of Mecca between 1882 and 1905. See, Kuneralp, *Son Dönem Osmanlı Erkan ve Ricali, Prospegrif Rehper*, 20.

<sup>211</sup> Sheriffs’ role of slave trading in Mecca must be a common phenomenon. See; for example one case from Toledano, ‘Those who purchased the boy made him a eunuch and brought him to Jidda, where he was purchased by Ömer Nasıf Efendi, agent to the late Sharif of Mecca, who sent him to Istanbul to Ali Pasa, probably the famous grand vezir.’<sup>105</sup>.

soldiers and finally arrived at the port of Sirkeci in Istanbul. This second passage through the Mediterranean took place with a ship named *Kamil Paşa*.<sup>212</sup> They travelled hungry because they had run out of provisions. When they arrived in Istanbul, it was snowing and they could not stop themselves from eating snowflakes. Nadir Agha states that his entrance into the Palace did not happen incidentally. The reason behind the Sultan's demand of Abyssinian eunuchs lay in the events that took place between two Sudanese eunuchs and the death of one of them.<sup>213</sup> According to Nadir Agha, after this event, the Sultan only wanted to acquire slaves who did not know any Turkish so that they could not communicate with the other slaves in the Palace. He must have been castrated at some point in this part of the journey into enslavement<sup>214</sup> but he did mention it neither in his memoir nor in the interviews.<sup>215</sup>

#### 4.4 Childhood memories about homeland

In this part of his memoirs, he mentions local cuisine, the modes of dressing, and items bartered in the neighborhood where he grew up. He states that the most delicious food of his hometown is a fresh corn wrapped in banana leaves called *kimbo* in his native language. To modern readers' surprise, he underlines the value of salt as a barter item, a practice that lasted right into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in remote areas of Ethiopia.<sup>216</sup> He also describes the hairstyles of women as a way to distinguish maidens from married women since teenage maidens were obliged to shave their hair at the top of the head. The shaven hair is allowed to grow only after the women have

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<sup>212</sup> I have not come across proper evidence regarding the ship but it would be interesting to add the reports during its journey if the ship really existed.

<sup>213</sup> I am writing an article on the very interesting event which took place in 1888. A young eunuch named Firuz was killed by an older eunuch named Nedim who was executed as a result of the offence. See the documents, BOA: Y..A.. RES, 45, 2; MV, 37, 7; DH.MKT, 1546, 117.

<sup>214</sup> For the places where castration took place see Şaul, 'Geçmişten Bugüne Siyah Afrika'dan Türkiye'ye Göçler: Kölelikten Küresel Girişimciliğe,' 34.

<sup>215</sup> For the dreadful details of castration, death rates and post-castration conditions, see, Hathaway, *Beshir Agha Chief Eunuch of Ottoman Imperial Harem*, 18-23.

<sup>216</sup> 'Encyclopedia of Money.'

matured and married. The first growth of this shaven hair after marriage is called *Endermamit* or *Fesesay*. The hair that had not been shaved, that is, the outlying fringe, is either braided or combed. On the website where I received this information from, it is indicated that this phenomenon called *sadula* is practiced mostly by the *Amharas* and *Tigreans*.<sup>217</sup> This knowledge also confirms Mahir Şaul's assumption that Nadir Agha came from Oromia Zone of Ethiopia.<sup>218</sup> Nadir Agha concludes his narrative by describing jungles in which wild coffee and lemon trees grew. His narrative provides useful insights about his native land and this aspect of the slavery is still unknown in the studies of slavery in the Middle East. We should note, on the other hand, that this material requires a thorough knowledge of African history for specific regions and specific periods, which would indeed enrich slavery studies in the Ottoman Empire and other areas. The way he remembered his hometown is also a sign of his yearning for a lost land and relatives.

#### 4.5 Life in the palace (1889-1909)

Although the information about his arrival at the Palace varies, we can be sure that his arrival took place in 1889.<sup>219</sup> In the inventory document of 1893, we encounter his name with the information of his exact entrance date to the Palace, it was on December 15, 1889 (*3 Kânûn-ı evvel 1305*). His age is noted as 22 and following the information pertaining to his occupation of the post of the *musahib* of the

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<sup>217</sup> 'Ethiopian Hair Styles.'

<sup>218</sup> Şaul, 'Geçmişten Bugüne Siyah Afrika'dan Türkiye'ye Göçler: Kölelikten Küresel Girişimcilığe,' 85.

<sup>219</sup> In his Memoirs he states that he came to the Palace immediately after the killing of a young Sudanese eunuch by an elder one in 1888. Right after he mentions that his initial days in the Palace coincided with the visit of German emperor Wilhelm II in 1889. On the other hand, in his interview and in the Memoirs of Abdülhamid's daughter the year is given as 1885. But I accept the date as 1889 for sure since the document from the archive states the year as 1889. See, Junne, Appendix XI, the inventory that consists of entry dates and biographies of black servants of the imperial harem (1893) in Junne, the Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of the Power in the Court of the Sultan. Also, see Toledano 'The Imperial Eunuchs of Istanbul: From Africa to the Hearth of Islam,' 379-390.

Excellency.<sup>220</sup> Nadir Agha mentions his puzzlement when he encountered the Sultan who spoke with him in Arabic and that, among the six eunuchs, paid great attention to him. Upon the order of the Sultan, he and other eunuchs were trained for good manners, received religion lessons and earned a salary of 500 *kuruş* (piaster) for their service. However, Nadir Agha notes that they did not receive qualified higher education, which was considered dangerous. But, both from different sources and his own narrative, we can conclude his brightness. He gained the appreciation of the Sultan for having found a piece of information on the illness of the Sultan's son from the encyclopedia. Abdülhamid's daughter, in her memoir, also writes about Nadir Agha's skills. For instance, he was the only one who was able to drive a car, which had come from Paris for the Sultan. Nadir Agha also used the motorized pedal boat in the pond in the garden of Yıldız palace.<sup>221</sup> Archival documents also list medals, which he received during his service, even one given by the Shah of Iran.<sup>222</sup>

Another interesting story he tells us is that Menelik II sent the general Maşaşa, his delegate to Istanbul<sup>223</sup>, which provided an opportunity for Nadir Agha to search for his family, which had been the biggest desire of his life. In his interview, he states that:

Sultan Abdülhamid II himself introduced me to the personal delegate of Menelik II at Yıldız Palace by saying: "I will introduce you to your countryman. He will ask you for a favor which I also would like you to accommodate." <sup>224</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> See Appendix XI, the inventory that consists of entry dates and biographies of black servants of the imperial harem (1893) in the Black Eunuchs of the Ottoman Empire: Networks of the Power in the Court of the Sultan, I. B Tauris, 2016.

<sup>221</sup> Yılmaz, *Sultan Abdülhamid'in Harem Hayatı*, 98.

<sup>222</sup> BOA: İ.TAL, 96, 58; İ.TAL, 135, 79; İ.TAL, 208,11; İ.TAL, 227, 36.

<sup>223</sup> For the relationship between Abdülhamid II and Menelik II, see Orhonlu, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti: Habeş Eyaleti*, 164. For his visit see, BOA-BEO/3184/238773 and BOA- BEO/3232/242326.

<sup>224</sup> 'Nadir Ağa,' 6.

General Maşaşa, having a direct interest in the request, took notes based on the information provided by Nadir Agha's about his hometown. After a while, when both the Sultan and Nadir Agha thought that the general Maşaşa forgot them, they received a letter from him written in French and two long bags and a wooden box. In the letter, it is written that in spite of all their efforts and wishes, they were just able to inform him that his family moved from southern Ethiopia to Kenya at some point. Together with the letter, they also sent two elephant tusks and gold bullion. After sharing this anecdote, he sadly announces that he lost all his hopes to find his family.

In the second part of his memoirs, rather than mentioning himself, he presents his observations about events occurring around him. He acknowledges the Sultan's political stand from his own perspective. It should be noted that one common point about his narratives is that he envisions himself as a loyal subject of his master and remembers him with great respect. An apologetic attitude regarding enslavement in Islamic societies has not been an uncommon phenomenon. In his narrative, it would not be wrong to speculate that Nadir Agha creates his own defensive position by creating a loyal tie with his former master since "*reattachment* was no less important to enslaved Africans, who were brutally detached from their kin groups on the continent and transplanted into an alien milieu, socially and culturally so different from the environment they had grown up in."<sup>225</sup> His attachment should be evaluated within the context that he was deracinated and left kinless and in need for fictional ties to cope with traumas of his enslavement.

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<sup>225</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 31.

#### 4.6 Life outside the Palace walls (1909-1957)

“Look at this strange destiny that my path has taken from the Palace to a hovel”<sup>226</sup>

With the dethronement of Abdülhamid II, Nadir Agha found himself in prison. With the words of Hakan Erdem:

The dispersal of the Imperial Harem, and the punishment of the ex-Sultan's slaves, who were regarded as the tools of his absolutism, began simultaneously. The eunuchs of the Palace were imprisoned. One of them, the Chief *Musâhib* (Companion) Agha, was accused of being one of the founders of the obscure Muhammedan League (*Cemiyet-i Muhammediye*) which had incited the mutiny. He was publicly executed and his fortune was confiscated for the Treasury. The Third Musahip, Nadir Agha, saved his life only by admitting that he had bribed the soldiers to mutiny, and by showing the whereabouts of some of Abdülhamid's valuables to the Macedonians.<sup>227</sup>

As in the case of Cevher and Nadir Agha, the proximity of the eunuchs to the members of the Ottoman dynasty put them in a position of extensive power and vulnerability since they were the ear of the Sultan and controlled the information flow. According to Nadir, Cevher Agha, who was always interested in receiving *jurnals* (collection of information on different matters), fell a prey to this habit of his. Nadir Agha also agrees with the daughter of Abdülhamid that Cevher Agha was the target of the personal enmity of the *jurnalcı* (a sort of collector of information) who used to submit his *jurnals* to Abdülhamid through Cevher and who, afterwards, wanted to get rid of him. After thirty-three days of imprisonment, he stepped into his new life without having any idea about what to do next. His own words are worth quoting at length:

During the first days I was full of surprise after spending so much time within the walls of the Palace; and then suddenly facing life perplexed me. I did not know what to do. I did not have money; nonetheless, a friend of mine owed me some money, worth of 700 *kuruş*. I got it back, it was considered to be a

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<sup>226</sup> ‘Nadir Ağa, 7.

<sup>227</sup> Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800-1909*, 148.

good fortune but it was difficult for those who spent twenty-seven years of his life in the Palace.<sup>228</sup>

Regaining his freedom all of a sudden, he, who did not have any experience in real life, must have been a third misfortune for him after his enslavement and second sale to the Palace. With the 700 *kuruş*, he bought forty Crimean cows and started to do dairy farming. In this part of the interview, he mentions that “look at this strange destiny that my path has taken from the Palace to a hovel”.<sup>229</sup> During his narrative, he does not talk about the horrors of slavery nor does he talk about the beauty of gaining freedom. The stain of slavery was pursuing him even after gaining his freedom. In his narrative, it is hard to gather any conscious appreciation on the part of him regarding the contrast between slavery and freedom. Freedom seems to have brought him only another obscurity after his enslavement. Being a eunuch and a black man, the integration of Nadir Agha as a freed slave into the community could not be taken for granted. According to Zilfi, “black eunuchs, who presided over the gender-segregated security of the imperial harem and of the palace's upper-class imitators, saw little advantage in emancipation.”<sup>230</sup> In one of the interviews titled What does Nadir Agha, Abdülhamid’s closest man, have to say about his former master?<sup>231</sup>, the interviewer uses Nadir Agha’s past as a eunuch to fashion a derogatory style for his piece when he jokes about his life. The piece reflects an obvious prejudice attack against castrated sexuality.

In the same interview when the interviewer asks his age, he answers that he did not pay the road tax that year, which means that he was sixty-five years old in 1934. The interview published in 1957 claims that he had just passed away recently

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<sup>228</sup> ‘Nadir Ağa,’ 7.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid., ‘Şu garip tecelliye bakınız. Yolum saraydan ahıra intikal etmişti.’

<sup>230</sup> Zilfi, *Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire*, 129.

<sup>231</sup> Çapanoğlu, ‘Abdülhamid’in En Yakın Adamı Nadir Ağa Eski Efendisi İçin Neler Söylüyor,’ 29.

at the age of eighty-eight.<sup>232</sup> According to Jane Hathaway, “a eunuch who survived the castration operation had a good chance of living into his eighties or even nineties.”<sup>233</sup> During his long life, he experienced terrible events; to name only a few; losing his father in one of the raids, falling into the hands of slave traders, undergoing castration all which were parts of the evils of slavery. It is hard to anticipate his real feelings about the institution, since he does not mention them during his narration and interviews. On the other hand, he survived under slavery and won the affection of the Sultan by impressing him with his knowledge. With the dispersal of the Imperial Harem, all eunuchs found themselves “free” all of a sudden and many fell into a bad predicament which newspapers of the period display.<sup>234</sup> They even established an aid society to be able to help each other.<sup>235</sup> They Nadir Agha was amongst the “luckiest” ones since he had his own pavilion and servant to serve him at home and the only one at the same time, in our knowledge, who left his memoirs behind. This positive side of his life story has paved the way for some historians to view either Ottoman or Islamic forms of slavery as more or less benign because of a sociocultural understanding that provided slaves with the opportunity to rise to a high social status. Against those arguments, his life story shows that Ottoman slavery was equally injurious and deprived Nadir Agha not only of his freedom and dignity but also exposed him to all sorts of physical and psychological violence.

In this part of the chapter I have tried to underline that slaves in this category like domestic and agricultural slaves suffered from their experience of

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<sup>232</sup> In his book on Göztepe, a district of Istanbul, Bedri Şehsuvaroğlu claims that he was born in 1882 and passed away in 1961. See, Şehsuvaroğlu, *Göztepe*, 107

<sup>233</sup> Hathaway, *Beshir Agha Chief Eunuch of Ottoman Imperial Harem*, 21.

<sup>234</sup> Kandemir, ‘Haremağaları,’ 66-70.

<sup>235</sup> Karakışla, ‘Harem Ağaları Teavvün Yurdu (1919) - Harem Ağaları Birleşin!’



enslavement, perhaps in a different but at the same time familiar ways. Regardless of their environment, all slaves were deracinated from their homeland and left kinless in a foreign environment. And they were also treated as salable human commodities. Here we should note that the conditions of eunuchs were worse than other enslaved persons within the *kul/harem* type of enslavement on different counts: “Eunuchs had less to expect from the world outside the harem since they were handicapped, often unfit to engage in a demanding menial job, unable to form families and integrate into society.” Nadir Agha’s biographical data coming from his dictate memoirs points not only at the difficulties he faced in slavery but also the legacy of slavery after gaining his freedom.

With this brief summary of the term *kul/harem* slavery and Nadir Agha’s biography in mind, I think it is significant to inquire into the commonalities shared by enslaved people rather than asking in what ways this type of slavery is distinctive from other types of slavery practiced in the empire. Otherwise, we can fall into oversimplification in our understanding of Ottoman slavery in general, which could result in “benign” understanding of Ottoman slavery. According to Toledano, “rather than thinking of all types of enslavement as unrelated, we will more fruitfully see them on the continuum of varying origins, cultures, functions and statutes.”

I agree with Toledano on his stance emphasizing similarities shared by all enslaved people. Orlando Patterson, in his influential comparative book on slavery, raises an important question: “in what sense is the word “slave” meaningful when applied to both grand vizier of the Ottoman Empire and Ethiopian domestic slave in a household of a modest merchant?” Though he agrees that there, indeed, was difference among slave types, he also warns us against the danger of differentiation. When the differences are overemphasized, the complexities of the phenomenon of

slavery might be lost. In the chapter Patterson titled as “The Ultimate Slave”, in tackling the elite slaves he argues that the historical existence of elite slaves presents us with a crucial test. Both authors along with other historians agree that regardless of their surroundings all slaves were deracinated from their homeland and left kinless in a foreign environment.

The account of Nadir Agha thus serves here what Patterson calls a crucial test. His life story helps us to understand how such narratives are worthy of closer examination and may challenge the assumptions pertaining to the history of Ottoman slavery. Careful reading of Nadir Agha's account at first helps us to see that from his very first encounter of slave raiders, his life had been shaped with enslavement. He lost his father in one of the raids; he was deracinated from his homeland and his family and carried away to alien lands and handed down to people with whom he shared almost nothing. Staying silent on his castration, actually, whispers the trauma inherited in this barbarous practice. When trying to understand the phenomenon of the eunuch, not only the castration itself but also the products of the operation should be central to the consideration of eunuchs. Slavery did not only separate him from his ancestors but also alienated him from his descendants by emasculation. He had no name of his own, lived in the margins of the society he had served.

It is believed and probably true that Hikmet refers to Nadir Agha one of his poems in *Human Landscapes from My Country*.<sup>236</sup> If this assumption is true, his loneliness could not be better captured than this poem.

Afternoons like this,  
the Göztepe station is deserted  
except for a black Eunuch of the Harem

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<sup>236</sup> One of the commentators tells a memory of her mother on one of the blog spots written on Göztepe Train Station. She remarks that her mother told her a story of a black eunuch named Nadir Agha who used to come to Göztepe train station and sat on the bench by himself. According to the testimony, he was from Abyssinia, and was very tall, gentle, quiet and lonely man. see: <http://lcivelekoglu.blogspot.com.tr/2013/12/ekstasyonlar-3-goztepe-tren-istasyonu.html>

sitting by himself  
always on the same bench.  
He's very tall,  
very thin.  
One of the last.  
The oldest.  
Concrete villas.  
The 3:45 train goes screaming past<sup>237</sup>

Much worse than his enslavement, his account reveals that freedom was another  
obscurity that he had to handle. In the eyes of people around them they were racially  
inferior. In the words of an Ottoman statesman of Sultan Abdulhamid II, when he  
describes a parade in the Palace, we can capture the pejorative glance on eunuchs as  
well as black skin color:

The Brass band was beginning to play music for the Sultan's salutation over  
the gallery above and Sultan Abdülhamid II just appeared with the opening of  
the door on the right side. Tahsin Pasha and *musahib* Nadir Agha followed  
him. I was at the bottom of the line as a newly recruited clerk. One *Arab* was  
in the forefront. He was decorated with solid golds starting from his throat to  
his stomach. His chest was full of medals. The head clerk, the chief  
chamberlain, the clerks of the chamberlain came after him. This *Arab* was the  
chief harem eunuch. I knew what position occupied by chief harem eunuchs  
in the Ottoman history. I even read that some among them had played very  
important roles in the state politics. However, whatever the reason it annoyed  
me that this African black was leading the twenty, twenty-five intellectual  
statesmen. *Fellah*, (a term connotes black skinned person), was like dozing  
off while he was standing.<sup>238</sup>

I will touch upon the perception of the black skin color in the next chapter, but this  
present example displays that however great political power black eunuchs hold in  
their hands, it does not change the pejorative perceptions against them. Being black  
and a eunuch are used interchangeably to denote 'inferior' status of these people. On  
the other hand, Baki Tezcan claims that "the racial tensions in early seventeenth  
century Istanbul were not a simple reflection of prejudices against Blacks but rather a

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<sup>237</sup> Hikmet, *Human Landscapes from My Country: An Epic Novel in Verse*, 17.

<sup>238</sup> Mayakon, *Yıldızda Neler Gördüm*, 32.

re-production of those prejudices with political connotations.”<sup>239</sup>

Political envy must play a role in shaping the attitudes towards enslaved Africans but I disagree with Tezcan on his assumption that insults depicted in the writings of authors like Bontazâde and Karaçelebizade were more a “reflection of a political clash than a symbol of racial prejudices.”<sup>240</sup> In his pioneering work on race and slavery in the Middle East, Bernard Lewis shows how race plays a role in shaping attitudes and perception in the society. He shows us that many authors attribute the black’s physical appearance to pejorative adjectives like ugly, dull, or even monstrous. Attributions towards black skin color within a majority-white society also causes the limitation of opportunity applies to manumitted black slaves.<sup>241</sup> From the archival documents, for example, we are informed that a person named Mehmed Tevfik took money from Nadir Agha by threatening him.<sup>242</sup> The document is reticent concerning the role played by Nadir Agha’s skin color, but we can at least speculate that his vulnerability could have made him the target of the perpetrator.

Having discussed the effect of skin color on Nadir Agha’s life story, I will move in the next chapter to a novel called *Hazine* (“Treasure”), by Abu’l Akif Mehmed Hamdi, published in book format in 1911 in order to discuss the role of race. This work is particularly relevant to the issue of race, because it disentangles the questions of slavery and blackness, by presenting the parallel and intertwined stories of two slave women, one Black and one White. They are both inducted in the highest circles of power of Ottoman society, but their contrasting fortunes exposes

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<sup>239</sup> Tezcan, ‘Dispelling the Darkness: The Politics of ‘Race’ in the early Seventeenth Century Ottoman Empire in the Light of the Life and Work of Mullah Ali,’ 95.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>242</sup> BOA, DH.EUM.THR 3/45, 1329.M.04

clearly the extra burden of skin color, in addition to and independent of the social debility due to subaltern status.



CHAPTER 5

REPRESENTATION OF SLAVERY AND BLACKNESS

IN THE LITERARY WORKS OF LATE OTTOMAN EMPIRE

5.1 Literature as a historical source

During the 2015 Nobel Prize for literature award ceremony the laureate Svetlana Alexievich said, “I collect the everyday life of feeling, thoughts and words. I collect the life of my time. I am interested in the history of the soul. The every day life of the soul, the things that the big picture of history usually omits, or disdains. I work with missing history. I am often told, even now that what I write is not literature, it is a document.” Then she asked this question: “What is literature?” and she answered: “There are no boundaries between fact and fabrication, one flows into the other.”<sup>243</sup> Alexievich’s standpoint resonates with the theory of New Historicism. “Sub-literary” texts and uninspired non-literary texts all can be read as documents of historical discourse.

An important social cultural historian working on the early modern period, Natalie Zemon Davis begins her article with the questions posed to her by Stephan Greenblatt. He asks her what her engagement with literature is and why she keeps coming back time and again to Rabelais? Her answer is illuminating, as it points at a new movement in History:

I pondered, and realized that the answer was not straightforward. I have always found Rabelais a pleasure to read and have marveled at the surprises in each new reading. But over the years I changed in my relation to those surprises and to their use in my work. So my answer is a history, a personal history, but one, I think, characteristic of the experience of other social historians of my generation or younger who began to relate to literature in a new way.<sup>244</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Alexievich, ‘On the Battle Lost.’

<sup>244</sup> Davis, ‘Historian and Literary Uses,’ 21.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, social history paved the way for historians to come closer to other disciplines notably anthropology and literature. The discipline of history has welcomed the agency of "submerged" social groups like women, workers, minorities, children, slaves, in other words the lower levels of society and the liminal groups. Unfortunately source materials concerning these groups are very scarce, and most of them are literary. Davis, one of the pioneering names of social history, consults Rabelais to get a better picture of the history of reformation in Lyon. Accepting the fictions value as sources for the life of the lower orders, she is always careful about how to make sense of them, benefitting interpretive approaches and ethnographic information drawn from anthropology. Hence, Davis decides to perceive all texts and acts described in any form of texts as relational, addressed to someone else, and received and interpreted by different audience. We know that a good number of scholars followed the same path as Davis and had similar challenges in their work. They too found their own impressive literary and ethnographic solutions even though others can stay sceptical of this cooperation. For instance, Dorothy Burton Skårdal, writes in her essay criticizing Kristian Hvidt's approach that "(T)he novel or short story can be used an illustration of reality but... it cannot be used as a historical source". Skårdal opposes any strict hierarchy between literary sources and written ones by underlining the necessity of the historians' craft for both sources, and express in her own words the pursuit of our discussion;

I do not accept the absolute objectivity of "fact" and because I have read so much Scandinavian-American literature that describes the historical life of that group so vividly and accurately. I have spent years testing it against traditional historical accounts and materials, and it holds true. Individual literary works vary greatly, to be sure, just as individual historical sources do, or individual accounts of anything in the present. The very first principle of any historian is never to believe any piece of evidence on its own merits, but to check it against anything and everything else available; and the second principle is, although nothing can ever be certain, the more witnesses who

agree on a given point, the more likely that point is to be "true" ("what actually happened," "the fear," or whatever).<sup>245</sup>

The discussion in historiography has implicitly or explicitly revolved around the question of the authenticity of the source materials and whether they are relevant or not. As Davis underlines, historians ask their usual questions while working on archival materials. These questions usually are "Is this a forged text? What kind of document is this? What has been omitted?" She goes on to say that she can ask the historian's usual questions for all the texts she can work on: "From what point of view has this been written? That is, is it a work by a Protestant, Catholic, or someone in between? By a man or woman? By a rich physician, humanist priest, or proud printing worker?"<sup>246</sup> Adopting these inquiries for novels and their authors concerning the theme of Ottoman slavery, I believe that we have an opportunity to gain an insight about what was going on in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Ottoman society and what attitudes people had towards slavery, slave trade, race and so far.

Michael Ferguson rightly points out the fact that in addition to state documents, which inevitably mirror the view of the administration, researchers should make use of private papers and personal memoirs.<sup>247</sup> The editors of *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Aesthetic Manifestation of Diaspora and History* go further and state that they "recognize the need to consider the importance of literature and literary expression in examining the African Diaspora, precisely because literary forms are key in understanding the uses of the memory."<sup>248</sup>

Up to this point I have benefited from archival documents namely *istiknames* as well as a biographical document concerning the life of an enslaved eunuch called

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<sup>245</sup> Burton, ' 'Hard' Facts and 'Soft' Sources: Literature as Historical Source Material,' 76.

<sup>246</sup> Davis, 'Historian and Literary Uses,' 22

<sup>247</sup> Ferguson and Toledano, 'Ottoman Slavery and Abolition in the Nineteenth Century,' 198.

<sup>248</sup> Opoku-Agyemang, Lovejoy, and Trotman, (Eds.) *Africa and Trans-Atlantic Memories: Literary and Asthetic Manifestation of Diaspora and History*, 1.



Nadir Agha. By using these documents I have tried to reveal the voices and experiences of enslaved Africans while informing the views of the administration or slaveholders. In this chapter I will use a novel as a historical document to show how blackness and slavery were imagined and represented in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire. By doing so, I also try to understand the raptures and continuities among archival sources and fictional ones. In Ottoman society slavery, as I have explained, did not concern only blackness or African identity; up to the first decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century most slaves were not African, but whites from Europe or the Caucasus region, and for women slaves, even at the end of that century this may still have been true. The work we will focus on does involve an enslaved African woman though, and it is a novel called *Define* (“Treasure”), by Ebu’l Akif Mehmed Hamdi, published in book format in 1911<sup>249</sup>. It is, in fact, particularly relevant to our subject, because it disentangles the question of slavery and blackness, by presenting the parallel and intertwined stories of two slave women, one Black and the other White. They are both inducted into the highest circles of power in the Ottoman society, but their contrasting fortunes expose clearly the extra burden of skin color, in addition to and independent of the social debility due to subaltern slave status. The novel has the added advantage of being based on a purported historical event of the reign of Mahmud II. Some confirmation is also available as to the historical source of its protagonists and some of the key events. The novel is in a way very much the continuation of debates that started in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on slavery, manumission and the White slave and Black slave issues with their different aspects, which I shall tackle in this chapter.

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<sup>249</sup> Ebü’l Akif Hatib Mehmed Hamdi, *Define*.

## 5.2 The author and summary of the novel

*Define*<sup>250</sup> was relatively unknown until recently and its author is not included in the canon of modern Turkish literature, but three aspects of it make it unique. First, to our knowledge, it is the first novel in which an enslaved African woman is the protagonist and narrator, instead of being a secondary character. Second, the novel was written by a local author in the provincial city of Bursa rather than an intellectual in the capital, which was a very rare occurrence for the genre. Lastly, this novel also functions as a tool for remembering, for the transformation of history into memory. Here, we have not simply figures of history, but figures for a *remembered* history by an enslaved African woman.

As for the author, Ebu'l Akif Hatib Mehmet Hamdi, secondary publications have so far yielded very little biographical information. They only report that he was not only able to publish three novels between the 1910 and 1933 but it was also announced that he had ten more upcoming publications. We also know that he preferred to select his characters from among simple people of the countryside, Black servants, grocers, butchers, maids, old gossip women, lustful senile old men. Making them speak in their own idiolects, Mehmed Hamdi opens a window for his readers to the colorful world of mansions and streets.<sup>251</sup> A two-paged article about him in a local short-lived magazine of 1925-1926 by a local literature teacher informs us that Mehmed Hamdi was a preacher in the Haydar Pasha mosque, *Haydar Paşa Camii*, of Bandırma in Bursa. He was originally from Afyon and travelled to Egypt at the age of eighteen. According to Nuri Naci, the author of the magazine, he benefitted from

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250 The novel caught my attention while I was reading *Özgürlük ve Esaret* [Freedom and Enslavement] in Osman Gündüz's book on the novels of second constitutional period. I would like to thank Fatih Altuğ who found the printed version of *Define* and I transcribed it for our workshop. After I had completed my translation we learnt that it was published by Ömer Solak.

251 See in order: Bozdağ, '1923-1929 Yılları Arasında Yayımlanan Sanat ve Edebiyat Dergilerindeki Edebî Meseleler Üzerine Bir İnceleme,' MA thesis, 288. Gündüz, *İkinci Meşrutiyet Romanında Yapı ve Tema I-II*, 1030. Solak, *Define*, i-ix.

the stories told by janissary soldiers who fled to Bursa while writing his own novels and based them on real life events rather than making up plots for them.<sup>252</sup>

*Define* begins with a third person narrator, who briefly provides a frame of time, place and characters, then leaves the narration to the enslaved African woman protagonist named Kamer, meaning “moon,” a very common name given to enslaved African women. In the novel, real historical events such as the coronation of Mahmud II, the Janissary revolt and historical personalities are reflected through the eyes of Kamer as flashbacks. Actually, the time-space coordinates of her narration extend only to two evening conversations, in the course of these conversations the author allows the protagonist to tell her story of enslavement and create her own version of history, which on the hand enables Kamer to assert her identity that had been suppressed throughout her slave life, and on the other renders the reader aware of the dark side of this past subordination.

In the opening of the novel, having come to visit a major exhibition, probably Sergi-i Umumi Osmani of 1863, which coincided with Sultan Abdülaziz’s return from Egypt, Azmi Efendi, his wife and their son became guests in the dervish lodge of Saffet Paşa, a lodge that really existed in Istanbul. We get acquainted with Kamer As the maid in the Dervish’s household. After the guests’ arrival, the attitude and behavior of Kamer change, suggesting the awakening of a stirring about the past. When her mistress asks Kamer what the matter is, she begins to speak of past events suppressed for many years.

From the story Kamer tells, we learn that she was kidnapped from a village in Africa, has travelled to Istanbul by sea and entered into the Ottoman Palace. In the Palace, she met a Georgian White slave named Şehnaz. Incorporation of Şehnaz into the novel helps us understand the contrasting effect of skin color on the status and

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<sup>252</sup> Naci, ‘Tesâdüf,’ 2-3. I thank Erdal Bozdağ for sending the text to me.

fortunes on the two women. Both were eight years of age and are under the supervision of a master concubine who was based on the real historical figure of Cevri Kalfa. They were trained for service in the Sultan's quarters for different purposes. A few years after their arrival, Sultan Selim III was killed in an uprising, whereas his brother prince Mahmud managed to escape from the rebels. The three concubines played a crucial role in protecting the Sultan from the murderous intent of his pursuers.

Here it would be interesting to note Davis Fanny, an author of *The Palace of Topkapı*, who informs us about this event while writing on Golden Way, a plain stone staircase famous as the Staircase of Cevri Kalfa in Topkapı Palace. By quoting from a 19<sup>th</sup> century official historian Ahmet Cevdat Pasha, Fanny tells the story of the attempted murder of Mahmud II, which fits almost perfectly well with the story told in *Define*. One of the Georgian enslaved women, Cevri Kalfa, together with Anber Ağa, Mahmud II's personal *lala* and Hafız İsa rescued Mahmud II from the hands of assassins. According to the version told by Ahmed Cevdet :

When they heard the killers had entered Selim's apartment, they knew Mahmud's turn would come next. The *ağas* got ready to protect him with drawn swords, but Cevri's preparations were different. She went into a *külhane* (ash room) in which the stove that heated the water for an adjacent bath was located at the head of the staircase now named for her. There she filled the a bowl with ashes and quoting Cevdet Pasha, "When killers attacked this time she immediately threw handful of ashes into their eyes They wiped their eyes, and as they cried, 'Make way!' she kept them busy by throwing ashes again. Anber and İsa Ağas seized the opportunity and hoisted Mahmud above them."<sup>253</sup>

The significance of this part of the novel lies in the fact that it is the subjective presentation of real historical events from the perspective of Kamer as an eyewitness. Historical evidence both from the archives and secondary literature safely suggests

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<sup>253</sup> Davis, *The Palace of Topkapı in Istanbul*, 213-215.

that Cevri Kalfa played an important role in this event and as a result of her courage she became the treasurer of the Palace. But we cannot go beyond speculation as to Ebu'l Akif Hatib Mehmet Hamdi's acquisition of the story. He could have read Ahmed Cevdet Pasha or could have heard the story from the Janissaries. What we know is that he preferred to create two additional characters, whether they existed in reality or not, both of them were enslaved women, and narrate the events from the eyes of an enslaved African woman.

Returning to the novel, after this incident, the novel then settles into an intricate melodrama involving magnanimity as well as devil characters. Mahmud II became the new sultan and he rewarded these three concubines for their help. From his young age Sultan Mahmud II wanted to have the White girl Şehnaz as a consort, no such a thing was imaginable for Black girls, and they were trained for domestic chores only. Then, he learnt that Şehnaz fell in love with an artisan, he overcame his passion, let Şehnaz marry her beloved, and granted them a mansion. In order not to separate the two comrades, it was decided that Kamer would marry the artisan's servant named Abdullah, which also suggests the slave status of this person. This peaceful new life did not last long. Şehnaz gave birth to a daughter whereas Kamer had a stillborn. Kamer then became the nanny of her friend Şehnaz's baby's. But Şehnaz's husband died during a Janissary revolt and followed by Şehnaz's death due to sorrow. Kamer and her husband raised the orphan and Sultan Mahmud II took it upon himself to find a suitable husband for the grown-up orphan. A short time after her marriage the orphan became a mother to a boy. But bad fate followed, as often does in melodramas, and her husband was also killed during the revolt of Egypt. Kamer also lost her husband and in her desperation she turned once again to the Palace for help. This time, however, a new sultan was reigning, no one in the Palace

remembered her, and she returned empty handed. A mother and son who were Kamer's neighbors asked in marriage the widowed orphan woman, because they had their eyes on Kamer's wealth. When they were turned down they suborned Kamer's young maid. This maid poisoned the widow. Kamer found out that the life of the boy is also in danger. She took all jewelry and valuable objects that were the Sultan's gift and moved out and hid herself with the boy, Izzet, in order to start a new life. The evil neighbors did not give up, found the boy Izzet, and sold him to enslavers. Alone and with no resources Kamer took refuge in the dervish lodge of Saffet Paşa where she served as a maid. With this we came to the present time of the novel. When she tells the story, it is revealed that Mr Azmi, a guest of Saffet Pasha, is the little boy Izzet, his name was changed by slave dealers as Azmi. Kamer handed him the treasure she kept and the story concludes with a so-called "happy ending".

The arrival of the guests provoked in Kamer the need to articulate the trauma that she lives almost half a century earlier. Now, I will read *Define* as a textual presentation of race in the mindset of its author and try to locate it in the general perceptions and connotations of blackness in the late Ottoman society.

### 5.3 Representation of blackness and slavery in the novel

Black and White slaves were acquired in the Ottoman society for different purposes as we have discussed: Enslaved Africans were placed in the households as live-in servants whereas White female slaves, especially Circassians and Georgians during the 19<sup>th</sup> century were destined for reproduction and service in elite harems. The novel is important in the way it represents, by way of contrast, these two most common types of enslaved women. Throughout the novel, the attribution of skin color matters in different stages. First, I make these three preliminary observations.

When Mahmut II meets Şehnaz and Kamer, although the two are still children he is captivated by the former's charm while finding the latter only cute. Later on, both of them display the same effort to protect the Sultan, but Mahmud II rewards the White slave girl Şehnaz with diamonds and other valuable stones whereas the Black girl Kamer receives only small gifts. The different treatments do not end here. See, for example, the contradiction in this conversation between Kamer and Şehnaz, which takes place when the White girl is overburdened by the unwanted attention of the Sultan.

- I asked, Şehnaz, what is happening to you? She gave me a hug with tears in her eyes. 'I wish I were Black like you.' I said to myself 'what is happening?' I could not understand anything. But I should have understood... I am such a woodenhead Black woman!<sup>254</sup>

In this passage blackness becomes a wish for Şehnaz because she wishes not to be the center of the Sultan's attraction. In opposition to whiteness, blackness connotes unattractiveness. This was articulated in many other ways. In a memoir about Ottoman women, a writer accuses the young gentleman of a mansion with the bad taste of taking to bed the African woman servant.<sup>255</sup> Enslaved African females were never taken to the private quarters of the Sultan as consorts at any time in Ottoman history. Another interesting aspect of this passage is the agency of the enslaved White female. In opposition to what is commonly assumed, she resists joining the Sultan's harem which means that she rejects elite status for her love of a young attractive but humble man.

Enis Avni's *Odalığın Defteri* (A Notebook of Concubine) is worthy mentioning here, since in my view it provides us the utmost example of a White slave's resistance against being a concubine. The protagonist of this novel, a

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<sup>254</sup> Ebü'l Akif Hatib Mehmed Hamdi, *Define*, 33: "Vallahi ben de senin gibi Arap olaydım ne olurdu!"

<sup>255</sup> Örik, *Eski Zaman Kadınları Arasında: Hatıralar*, 22.

Circassian young woman named Gülşen, who is considered to be raised “as a daughter” of Sıtkı Pasha, realizes her slave status first time when she witnesses her sale. Her sale results from Sıtkı Pasha’s daughter’s jealousy of her. Everyone in the new mansion examines her like a newly bought possession. While this situation chafes her to be confined like this, the Pasha goes further and touches every part of her body. Every new day filling with resentment, when the day comes for making her a concubine of the Pasha, she decorates herself like a bride and makes love with Mükerrerem, a young adopted boy of the mansion. Being not satisfied with this action, she goes to the room where Pasha is waiting for her and throws the sheet stained with blood from this first intercourse to the face of the Pasha. As a result of her action, she was labeled as mad found herself locked in a room.<sup>256</sup>

Gülşen’s reaction should be considered as significant manifestations of indomitable resistance roused among enslaved women. The unwillingness of enslaved young women to be concubines of old Pashas is not a rare motif, which one can ignore. In *Sergüzeşt* (Adventure), Samipaşaze tells the story of Dilber, an enslaved Circassian woman, for whom, in the words of Kandiyoti, “the only possible liberation for a woman in her condition is suicide in the Nile, after she is sold into Egypt, banished from İstanbul household where she and the young man of the house, Celal, had fallen in love.”<sup>257</sup> Karamürsel has recently revealed a story of a young Circassian woman, Fatma Leman, and her struggle to end her enslavement. Even though she was sold as a concubine to a high-ranking official, it did not change the usual course of her slavery. As Karamürsel states:

It comprised different forms of coercion, including kidnapping, rape and resale, touched by varying degrees of despair and vulnerability, reflecting

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<sup>256</sup> Gündüz, *İkinci Meşrutiyet Romanı 1908-1918 Yapısal ve Tematik İnceleme*, 488-489.

<sup>257</sup> Kandiyoti, ‘Slave Girls, Temptresses, and Comrades: Images of Women in the Turkish: Images of Women in the Turkish Novel,’ 40.



poverty, the lack of kin support, and such conditions as pregnancy and child bearing.<sup>258</sup>

Even though white slaves were considered to be more ‘advantageous’ in comparison of black slaves who were far more severely restricted in their social and occupational mobility, the examples prove that enslaved woman rejected enslavement, disrespectful of their race or origin.

In the later pages of the novel, we witness that Kamer also internalized the perception of others about her. Before her wedding she looks in a mirror wearing a red wedding dress, and she finds herself cute rather than beautiful or attractive. To quote from the novel: “even though I am coal-black, I see my cuteness in the mirror because of my youth.”<sup>259</sup> On *Prejudice and Piety, Literature and Law*, Bernard Lewis reminds us that blackness was an affliction; and in many verses and narratives, Africans are depicted as suffering from insults and discrimination, and while displaying resentment at this, yet in some way they accept their inferior status, as in the case of Kamer.<sup>260</sup> Additionally, some authors depict enslaved Africans mostly as ignorant and passive.

While these examples are clear indicators of the perceptions concerning blackness as the opposite of beauty and progress, blackness also becomes an indicator for social hierarchy. One of the impressive parts of the novel for me takes place when Şehnaz and Kamer move to the mansion given as a gift by the Sultan. Şehnaz settles at the upper story of the mansion but we find Kamer in the kitchen as a maid of the house. Their comradeship relation ends up with Kamer assuming the lower position as the maid of Şehnaz. Apart from this, the novel also presents that

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<sup>258</sup> Karamürsel, “The Uncertainties of Freedom: The Second Constitutional Era and the End of Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire,” 139.

<sup>259</sup> Ebü'l Akif Hatib Mehmed Hamdi, *Define*, 37.

<sup>260</sup> Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East An Historical Enquiry*, 28-37

Kamer is able neither to select her husband nor to become a mother of her own child. Rather, she takes care of Şehnaz's daughter, and even of her grandchild, as was often the case with enslaved Africans in the Ottoman society. Şehnaz's daughter reminds me the story of Halid Ziya Uşaklıgil's *Ferhunde Kalfa*, who always dreams about her marriage but has to raise the children and even the grandchildren of Hasna, the daughter of the Pasha. When she gets married, her hairs turns into grey, it become too late for her to have a baby.

Given the great variety of slave types in Ottoman society, a racial bias usually works against enslaved Africans in comparison to white slaves. In the mindset of the writer, Kamer's skin color automatically places her in the kitchen. In other words, Kamer is pushed to the bottom of social ladder by the author's unthinking supposition. In what follows I shall attempt to demonstrate the representation of slavery in the novel in relation to archival sources.

#### 5.4 The dark side of the "good treatment" thesis

As Toledano states:

"The crux of the Ottoman argument was that slavery in the empire, as in other Muslim societies, was fundamentally different from slavery in the Americas. In the main, it was far milder because slaves were not employed on plantations, were well treated, were frequently manumitted, and could integrate into the slave-owning society. Islamic law, it was further maintained, encouraged owners to treat their slaves well, and manumission was considered a pious act, for which the believer could expect remuneration."<sup>261</sup>

As Ehud R. Toledano, Hakan Erdem, Madaline Zilfi, Mahir Şaul, Ennaji Muhammed and Paul Lovejoy clearly show in their writings, perceptions have been changing over the past two decades or so, on the whole becoming more critical, less accepting, perhaps less prepared to tolerate the broader implications of what we may call the

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<sup>261</sup> Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*, 15.

“good treatment” thesis.<sup>262</sup> In his book on Slavery in *Tanzimat* literature, İsmail Parlatır acknowledges that 19<sup>th</sup> century modernist authors of the new genre of the novel, voice their ideas about slavery. He thinks that they presented a milder image of slavery in the Ottoman society because they were defensive in the face of harsh European criticism.<sup>263</sup> Mehmed Hamdi draws in his novel the picture of a powerful but compassionate master, the Sultan, who let the enslaved woman he was in love with marry her lover. Nevertheless, as the plot advances, we see that it becomes very hard for the characters to erase the stain of slavery. We know that Kamer is deracinated from her hometown in Africa, is destined to forget her native language. For her a marriage is arranged with a man whom she doesn’t know; she loses her baby and has to look after other children. After being sent from the Palace and losing those close to her, she finds herself desperate and kinless. Her neighbors, being aware of her vulnerable position, kidnap her foster-child and sell him into slavery. What we are presented with is an old woman waiting for her death but still working as a maid, who has neither a family of her own nor a house.

Enslaved people especially women were released from bondage into a new kind of dependancy and subordination. For this very reason, they continued to stay in the mansion they worked not because of, as Parlatır and Saz suggest, their attachment to the household but owing to the lack of other options.<sup>264</sup> I will quote two incidents from Leyla Saz’s memoir to demonstrate how she believes in what we have called as “good treatment thesis”:

Some slaves continue to live with their masters throughout their lifetime in order not to separate from them. They keep staying in their masters’ mansion

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<sup>262</sup> See Toledano As If Silent and Absent Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East. Erdem, ‘Magic, theft, and arson: the life and death of an enslaved African woman in Ottoman İzmit,’ Zilfi, Women and Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire. Lovejoy, ‘Concubinage and the Status of Women Slaves in Early Colonial Northern Nigeria.’ Şaul, “Geçmişten Bugüne Siyah Afrika’dan Türkiye’ye Göçler: Kölelikten Küresel Girişimciliğe.”

<sup>263</sup> Parlatır, *Tanzimat Edebiyatında Kölelik*, 34.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 20.

while benefiting from the privileges of the house. These slaves gradually get all authorization in their hands if they do not go wrong and continue to evaluate the circumstances properly. One of my sister's slaves tore *her manumission document into pieces with her own hands and never desired to leave from my sister's mansion*. She raised the children and grandchildren of her and died at the age of sixty within the very same household.<sup>265</sup>

Saz must not have been unaware of the difficulties of enslaved people after their so-called freedom since she was an important observer of her time. Most probably her judgments were shaped by what Toledano calls “attitude hurdle” which is a first barrier to an honest and open treatment of enslavement in Ottoman and other Islamic societies.<sup>266</sup> Karamürsel documents very well the uncertainties of the freedom of enslaved women with the words of Sırrıcemal, a Circassian enslaved woman, asking in her petition for a pension: “I think about my life in the past and of my future, I dread and get scared”. As Karamürsel points out after sixty years of service, Sırrıcemal found herself on the streets penniless and without friends and family, until a woman took pity on her and brought her home.<sup>267</sup>

Even though Mehmed Hamdi try to present the novel within the paradigm of the “good treatment” thesis, the course of events in the novel point in another direction, describes slavery with all pains and hurts for the enslaved characters. In my view, this duality of the perception of slavery in the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was very much a continuation of the debates that were opened in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century on slavery, abolition, and the White and Black slave issues. Even Ottoman intellectuals who supports the British campaign for abolition could buy slaves and select their views among them. In my view, they justified their actions by subscribing to the ideas that Ottoman slavery was a milder form of enslavement

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<sup>265</sup> Leyla Saz Hanım, *Harem'in İç Yüzü*, 72

<sup>266</sup> Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*, 15.

<sup>267</sup> Karamürsel, ‘The Uncertainties of Freedom: The Second Constitutional Era and the End of Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire,’ 143-144.

rather than facing its dark side. The representation of blackness and slavery in this novel could be read as a prototype for the general perception and understanding of slavery in the late Ottoman society. Under the influence of this so-called good treatment thesis, no one in the Ottoman society was able to abolish slavery completely in the domains of the empire. Slavery itself was not abolished, nor were the slaves as such emancipated as a result of universally accepted emancipatory rights. The “good treatment” thesis remained paramount in both academic writings and public opinions and paved the way for the racial prejudices toward African people in the modern day Turkey.

I would like to end with a few words on the importance of literature as a tool to understand Ottoman enslavement studies. Archival documents are usually silent on the traumas visited upon the enslaved women. Literature, on the other hand, can sometimes enable us to understand the brutality of slavery, which has long been silenced and suppressed in the documented history. The author of *Define* allows the protagonist to tell her own story and to create her own version of history, and although it is him who imagines this past and fashions it into her words this also enables the reader to an alternative past. This novel was written from within the paradigm of good treatment thesis, which the novel’s author could not transcend, and it says something about the values and preoccupations, the mentalities of the society in which it was written. And this narration draws us a parallel picture with the archival documents while complementing each other’s gap.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

This thesis is about the life stories of domestic and elite slaves of African origin in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Ottoman Empire. History of Ottoman slavery is usually narrated with benign terms as if nothing bad happened to enslaved people in the empire. Traditionally minded researchers, who base their arguments on different aspects of Islamic slavery, highlight the humane nature of slavery in the Islamic societies. While some prefer to close their eyes to the suffering of enslaved people by emphasizing the disgraced condition of slaves in the Americas, others completely ignore the existence of slavery in the empire. The ignorance of the historical reality of slavery has dire impact on the lives of the descendants of enslaved African people, so-called Afro-Turks, today. As I have discussed in the introduction, many of the Afro-Turks experience open expressions of racism, because the perpetrators of these ignorant acts think the Afro-Turks to be different based on their skin color. Recently in an interview Paul E. Lovejoy expressed the possible implications of this ignorance in the following words: “If we ignore and forget it [slavery], then we’re doomed to continue to live in a racist society that will continue to find ways to reinvent racism.”<sup>268</sup> Exposing and altering our misconceptions about slavery and its possible benign aspects should be the first step in our attempts to fight against the racism against Afro-Turks. This thesis, focusing on the debate on black slavery and its abolition, aims to provide an epistemological framework to articulate this struggle.

Ottoman Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a number of economic, social, political, military and cultural transformations which developed into an overall reform movement, also known as the *Tanzimat*. This period also coincides with the

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<sup>268</sup>Mueller. Interview with Paul Lovejoy.

age of abolition, which introduced the debates about and reforms pertaining to slave trade and its abolition in the Ottoman Empire. The British efforts aimed at ending slavery played a particular role. However, the wholesale abolition of slavery never took place in the Ottoman Empire and enslaved people gained their “freedom” as a result of individually granted manumission papers. Manumission cases had to be individually granted by *Şeriat* courts, which led to arbitrariness in obtaining manumission papers. In other words, enslaved people did not have the legal rights granted by emancipation. Uncertainties of freedom stayed with those people who were once enslaved throughout their lives.<sup>269</sup> Apart from the absence of wholesale abolition together with emancipation, as articulated by İpşirli-Argıt “manumission was not a severance of the master-slave relationship but a transformation of that relationship into something that was an even deeper bond than slavery.”<sup>270</sup>

Given this context, this thesis draws on a bottom-up perspective tracing the voices of the black slaves, particularly focusing on their micro histories and their experiences of slavery and “freedom” after manumission. It aims to unearth the voices of the slaves, one of the main subordinate groups rarely mentioned in historical studies pertaining to the Ottoman society. Therefore, the prime objective of this work is to dig for scattered data in the archival and fictional materials, which provide us the tools to trace the voices of the enslaved Africans. Hence, the thesis benefits from three main primary sources: a number of court records, a memoir, and a novel. In the light of these sources, the thesis examines the lives of domestic and elite slaves while excluding slaves working in agricultural and artisanal activities. In spite of the low level of interest in the subject of Ottoman slavery, the range and

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<sup>269</sup> See: Karamürsel, ‘The Uncertainties of Freedom: The Second Constitutional Era and the End of Slavery in the Late Ottoman Empire.’

<sup>270</sup> İpşirli-Argıt, ‘Manumitted Female Slaves of the Ottoman Imperial Harem (Sarayîs) in Eighteenth Century Istanbul,’ Ph.D dissertation, 21.

complexity of the institution has been studied by important scholars. Challenging what Toledano prefers to call the “good treatment thesis”, this thesis, following the paths opened up by the previous scholarship, aims to contribute this recent scholarship.

The chapter following the literature review focuses on the archival records, namely interrogation reports obtained from the folios catalogued under the Supreme Council of Judicial Ordinance in the State Archives of Prime Minister. The cases represented in the chapter, first of all, provide verbatim accounts of enslaved Africans and reveal that enslaved people endured many forms of abuse at the hands of their masters, including beatings. While one of the masters sold his slave when she was pregnant with his baby, the other slave holder not only beat his slave but also asked from his friends to do the same. Moving from the urban to rural areas of the empire, we are presented by a slave owner who beats his fugitive slave to death. One of the common points uncovered by these cases is that whereas enslaved people were eager to end their enslavement in the face of maltreatment, the slave holders, on the other hand, had no intention to give up their ownership rights over their slaves which was granted by *Şeriat* law. The most revealing case in this chapter titled “Seeking Freedom: The Escape attempt of a Black African Woman: Zeyneb” traces the absconding attempts of a young woman who was encouraged by ill-intentioned people. Zeyneb’s story, different from other cases, tells us about her own skills, hopes and dreams, henceforth sheds light on the unknown aspect of enslaved people’s lives. More importantly, it points out the fact that enslaved people strove for freedom even in cases where any apparent abuse or maltreatment was apparent. Close reading of the four court cases points out some important aspects pertaining to the lives of the enslaved Africans. A more extensive research in these documents



would constitute a thesis by its own and would answer many questions about the daily lives of the enslaved people vis-à-vis their relationship with slaveholders as well as the society they lived in.

Together with the interrogation reports, slave biographies provide unique sources for glimpsing into the life stories of the slaves. They open windows into the nature of slavery itself by offering first-person testimonies. However, enslaved people in the Ottoman Empire, to our knowledge, did not write their personal stories as slaves did in the Americas. For this very reason, Nadir Agha's dictated memory together with the interviews conducted with him offers us a rare opportunity to trace his own enslavement story. Unfortunately, his narrative with which I have worked to build the chapter does not openly equip us with expressions of the meaning of slavery and freedom, nonetheless when we read between the lines, his story reveals disgraced conditions of slavery ranging from deracination to travel into a strange land and being forced into slavery and kinlessness. Even though his narrative demonstrates his attachment to his master Sultan Abdülhamid II, his yearning for his family and homeland raises some questions concerning his sincerity in formulating his narrative. He pictured slavery as a benign institution in which he and his master acted out the natural roles as the father and the son. However, by reading his narrative "against the grain" and mining for clues Nadir Agha likely deemed unimportant, they provide detailed insight into the experience of slavery. Bifurcated nature of his narrative does not mean that there is no use in utilizing his biography; as David Bligh informs us "with the rediscovered tool of research, historians and literary critics have been able to open the world the slaves themselves made and

interpreted—their folk life, religious expression, modes of resistance, mores and values, and their ultimate psychological survival.”<sup>271</sup>

For the questions which remain unanswered by archival documents and the memoir, fictional texts offer one of the best tools to fill in the gaps regarding the perceptions of blackness or psychological aspects of slavery. By accepting constructed nature of the fictional text, the fourth chapter builds on a novel in which an enslaved African woman named Kamer is both the protagonist and the narrator. This work is particularly relevant to this study, since it disentangles the questions of slavery and blackness by presenting the parallel and intertwined stories of two slave women, one African and one Georgian. They are both introduced into the highest circles of power of the Ottoman society, but their contrasting fortunes clearly show the extra burden of skin color, in addition to and independent of the social debility due to the subaltern status. The novel has the added advantage of being based on a purported historical event dating from the reign of Mahmud II (the 1820s), and some confirmation is available as to the historical source of its protagonists and some of the key events. The novel is in a way very much the continuation of the good treatment thesis. Namely, the author tries to depict a benevolent master who takes care of his slaves, but the plot itself directs us to the psychological burden of slavery and the extra burden of skin color in the lives of black slaves in comparison to white slaves but it also warns us that slavery is a harsh reality for the members of both groups.

A quotation from Lovejoy’s interview cited in the beginning of this chapter constitutes the starting point of this thesis. If we turn a blind eye to slavery and its implication in our present society, then we are obliged to live in a racist society. Within the last decade, especially with the efforts of the late Mustafa Olpak, Afro-

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<sup>271</sup> Blight, ‘The Slave Narratives: A Genre and a Source.’

Turks have demanded not only recognition but also the inclusion of their stories in the history textbooks of the Turkish Republic. Demands for public acknowledgement of the suffering of the enslaved is a need; raising awareness of the history of slavery and its impact on present society should be followed with the collaboration between scientific research, policy making and social action. This task should be undertaken so as to give this crime against humanity its rightful place in collective memories, school textbooks, museums, on the political agendas and research work. This thesis through its own modest research agenda provides evidence for the crime against humanity and hopefully contributes to the burgeoning studies, which has broken the silence on enslavement and its consequence throughout the Ottoman Empire and in its aftermath.

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