


WHO'S THERE? STAGING THE SILENCED PASTS IN  
CONTEMPORARY THEATER IN TURKEY: KİM VAR ORADA?  
MUHSİN BEY'İN SON HAMLETİ

by  
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Approved by:



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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis study aims to investigate the re-enactment of difficult pasts in theatrical performances while questioning the representation of the silenced events and subjects of Turkey's recent history in the given political and aesthetic limits of present-day Turkey. To this end, this study investigates the representations of silenced accounts in the histories of Turkey's theater by concentrating on a biographical play called *Kim Var Orada? Muhsin Bey'in Son Hamleti* [Who's There? The Last Hamlet of Muhsin Bey] by Boğaziçi Gösteri Sanatları Topluluğu (BGST) premiered in 2016, İstanbul. The play portrays the life story of one of the most influential figures of Turkey's theater history, Muhsin Ertuğrul, and problematizes his mythic image within the ethnocentric history writing of Turkey's theater by depicting the events taking place in the transition period from Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey. I will investigate Kim Var Orada's strategies of performing history by looking at the critical and playful relationship that it builds with historical documents and discuss the performers' potential to bear witness to the historical event that they re-enact. Since Kim Var Orada firmly ties its texture to Shakespeare's Hamlet, I will analyze the possible reasons and outcomes of Hamlet's haunting of the Kim Var Orada's structure as an attempt to communicate with the traumatic pasts of Turkey's recent history.

## ÖZET

### KİM VAR ORADA? ÇAĞDAŞ TÜRKİYE TİYATROSU'NDA SESSİZLEŞTİRİLMİŞ GEÇMİŞLERİ SAHNELEMEK: KİM VAR ORADA? MUHSİN BEY'İN SON HAMLETİ

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Bu tez çalışması, Türkiye'nin yakın tarihindeki sessizleştirilmiş tarihsel olayların ve öznelerin günümüz Türkiye'sinin verili siyasi ve estetik sınırları dahilindeki temsilini sorgulayarak zorlu geçmişlerin tiyatro gösterilerinde yeniden canlandırılmasını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu sebeple, Boğaziçi Gösteri Sanatları Topluluğu (BGST) tarafından 2016 yılında İstanbul'da prömiyeri gerçekleştirilen Kim Var Orada? Muhsin Bey'in Son Hamlet'i adlı biyografik oyuna odaklanarak Türkiye tiyatro tarihindeki sessizleştirilmiş anlatıların izini süreceğim. Oyun, Türkiye tiyatro tarihinin en etkili isimlerinden biri olan Muhsin Ertuğrul'un yaşam öyküsünü anlatarak Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndan Türkiye Cumhuriyeti'ne geçiş sürecinde yaşanan olaylar üzerinden Muhsin Ertuğrul'un Türkiye tiyatrosunun etnosentrik tarih yazımı içindeki mitik imgesini sorunsallaştırmaktadır. Kim Var Orada'nın tarihi "performe" etme stratejilerini, tarihsel belge ile kurduğu eleştirel ve oyunsu ilişki üzerinden inceleyeceğim ve performer'ların yeniden canlandırdıkları tarihsel olaya tanıklık etme potansiyelini tartışacağım. Kim Var Orada oyun dokusunu Shakespeare'in Hamlet'ine sıkı sıkıya bağladığından, Türkiye'nin yakın tarihindeki travmatik geçmişlerle bir iletişim kurma girişimi olarak Hamlet'in Kim Var Orada'nun oyun yapısına musallat olmasının olası nedenlerini ve sonuçlarını analiz edeceğim.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

This thesis attempts to explore the re-enactment of difficult pasts in theatrical performances while questioning the representation of the silenced events and subjects of history in the given political and aesthetic limits of present-day Turkey. To this end, this study concentrates on a biographical play called *Kim Var Orada? Muhsin Bey'in Son Hamlet'i* [Who's There? The Last Hamlet of Muhsin Bey] by Boğaziçi Gösteri Sanatları Topluluğu (BGST) premiered in 2016, İstanbul. The play deals with one of the most influential figures of Turkey's theater history, Muhsin Ertuğrul, and problematizes his mythic image along with the ethnocentric history writing of Turkey's theater by depicting the events taking place in the transition period from Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey. I argue that *Kim Var Orada* demystifies the cult of Muhsin Ertuğrul through showing how the nationalistic fervor dominating the cultural politics in the Republican era formed silences by ignoring or erasing the multiethnic and multicultural environment of theatre making in the Ottoman period. Since *Kim Var Orada* ties its structure to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, I will attempt to read the play together with Shakespeare's tragedy. I will demonstrate how the characters of KVO are situated as reflections of *Hamlet* and also how the traumatic experiences create unmourned losses for both Muhsin and Hamlet. Lastly, I will analyze the possibility of performing history through these theatrical plays and the performer's potential to bear witness to the historical event.

*Kim Var Orada? Muhsin Bey'in Son Hamleti* (KVO) invites the audience to Muhsin Ertuğrul's study room when he is writing his memoir, remembering the past events and people that shaped the history of Turkey's theater he witnessed. Although a memoir is a personal account narrating a singular perspective of a historical phase, autobiographers can situate their books as a historical document, and may introduce both factual and objective quality into their narratives. Indeed, memoirs are generally accepted as hybrid forms located between a fictional and historical discourse through the individual's witnessing to a specific historical era (Canton, 27). Auto/biographers' embrace of factuality may be caused by a variety of reasons; however, at the end of the day, it signals a claim to possess the original "truth", which



gives an authentic touch to their experience of witnessing. To sustain this authenticity, auto/ biographers appeal to a “magisterial voice” to close the gap between the fictional quality of the narrative and the work of factual documentation. In the book *Biographical Theater*, Ursula Canton evaluates the need of auto/biographer’s positioning of their ‘magisterial voice’ in the text by suggesting that the “linguistic and discursive structures are thus used to cover the authorial presence” to create “truth effects” (Canton, 34). I think, to approach any magisterial account with a critical outlook to decode these “truth effects” necessitates not only examining the autobiographer’s actions and speech but also the silences and pauses to situate the writer’s subjective position in a broader historical and political context, especially when dealing with a difficult past. KVO is such a theatrical effort to trace the silencings in a difficult past by forcing its protagonist Muhsin Ertuğrul to re-evaluate the “factuality” and “objectiveness” of his memories by introducing two ghost figures on stage. One of them is Vahram Papazyan, an Armenian actor that he shared the stage with before the Republican Era, and the other is a fictional character Arusyak/ Latife Hanım, a Muslim woman disguised as an Armenian to be able to perform in theatrical plays—whose story is inspired by a short writing appeared in *Darülbedayi* magazine. KVO mobilizes its theatrical strategy to unravel its autobiographer’s witnessing by investigating silences operating as a constructive element of the narrative. The issue of silencing, I believe, is a crucial aspect to make sense of the difficult pasts. Although these difficult pasts are not totally annihilated from either in official histories or from the hegemonic memory frameworks and historical narratives, their catastrophic effects and pains are still resonating in the fabric of society; in bodies, places, objects causing a sense of loss that makes the connection with these events difficult. KVO, as a theatrical play, negotiates the possibility to create an alternative engagement with the past. It presents alternative ways which can serve for a communication by transgressing discourses constituted through the institutional bodies and dominant historical accounts.

Besides the aforementioned point, as a theatrical play, it enables to reflect on the relationship between the historical document and fictitious elements while performing the past. KVO opens the way to think on the possibility of making sense of difficult pasts by both using the archival material and also going beyond it. What does it mean to distort the historical documents to offer different meanings to a long-attached significance carried by the historical document? What kind of strategies that a theatrical performance can obtain and utilize to better ground an “agora” for conversation with the traumatic pasts? In this thesis I will mainly concentrate on these issues while closely analyzing the play by parallelly reading it with *Hamlet*.

## 1.1 Writing the Histories of Turkey's Theater

"I am one of those who disapprove of the making of theatre for a moral end in other countries. But when it comes to the homeland, I think exactly the opposite. Given that we do not possess neither the writers, the artists, nor the prosperity to be able to produce art for art's sake... And until now, we have proven this with the works that we have composed and performed. In this situation, let us at least use the theatre, which we perform for something else than art's sake, in a beneficial way. I only find this beneficial in the plays written for a moral or social end" (Ertuğrul 1993, 34).

With the establishment of the Turkish Republic, theatre appeared as a medium hosting the nationalist and secularist ideologies to propagate a new subject-formation to the public. Muhsin Ertuğrul, like many of his contemporaries, was at the forefront of this project, even though he had an ambiguous relationship with the political authorities. Ertuğrul stressed the need for a revolutionary change in theater making by stating that "a new life demands a new theatre" (Ertuğrul 1993, 34). Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was sharing Ertuğrul's ambition for the art of theatre in terms of sustaining a transformation in the fabric of the society, ordered plays to playwrights and provided public fundings to create a national stage in Turkey (Skylstad 2010, 42). He even used theatre in foreign policy, particularly to reinforce the relations with Greece through exchanging theatre groups in the early 1930s (Landau 1984, 216). According to Skylstad, the early republican regime integrated late Ottoman intellectuals' perspective towards theater as a civilizing school "with a touch of Sultan Abdülhamid's wish to control to prevent unfortunate political messages" (Skylstad 2010, 42). Thus, theatre was perceived as a medium to shape the public sphere and the new modern Turkish subjectivity, and the main motor of this project was Turkish nationalism.

Ziya Gökalp was the chief theoretician formulating the first definitions of Turkish cultural nationalism. Even though he died in 1924, a year later the Turkish Republic's establishment, his main works produced between 1911 and 1918 while he was a member of İttihat ve Terakki Partisi [Committee of Union and Progress] prepared the grounds for ethnocentric theories of Türk Tarih Tezi [Turkish History Thesis] and Türk Güneş-Dil Teorisi [Turkish Sun- Language Theory] produced in the 1930s. One of Gökalp's inventions is to introduce an ideological outlook to bridge the gap

between the *millet* and *ümmet* systems operating in the Ottoman Empire that governed the relations between different groups within the Empire for centuries. *Ümmet* signifies the religion of a person or group like Muslim, Catholic, Orthodox, Jewish etc, whereas *millet* stands for the ethnic roots of people living under the Ottoman Empire such as Armenian, Kurdish and Greek. Gökalp suggested a possible mutual existence for both of these concepts by stating his personal identity's simultaneous belongings. He says that he belongs to the Turkish millet because he speaks Turkish, to the Muslim ümmet because he prays in Arabic, and to the Western civilization because he is thinking and communicating in French (Skylstad 2010, 33). Within his argumentation, the language becomes the central role in defining a person's identity, and the usage of both millet and ümmet in the sense that Ottomans employed lost its character to serve for Turkish national identity. In *Development of Secularism in Turkey*, Niyazi Berkes asserts that the rise of Turkish nationalism is firmly attached to the disintegration of millet and ümmet categories through a secularized outlook: "the beginnings and development of nationalism were conditioned by the degree to which the concepts of millet and ümmet were secularized" (Berkes 1999, 318).

Given the centrality of the Turkish nationalism in the foundation of the theatrical activity in the early Republican period, the attempts to record the histories of Turkey's theater are mainly influenced by this ideological paradigm. However, first I want to provide two contemporary accounts commenting on the general nature of history of theater scholarship in Turkey. In *Vartovyan Kumpanyası ve Yeni Osmanlılar*, Fırat Güllü states that the theatre history has never been a popular area of study among historians, even though the late Ottoman history is a vastly explored subject of inquiry. (Güllü 2008, 11). Similarly, in "Performing Turkishness", Adak and Altınay observed the same lack of scholarly interest in theater history and performance analysis. They state that the theatre departments mostly concentrate on studio training, and the critical amount of research on theater is produced in history or literature departments, and these works mostly lack the utilization of methodological tools of theatre and performance studies (Adak, Altınay 2018, 187). Given the lack of scholarly interest, and the focus on studying theatre on a text-based approach, the history of theater and performance in Turkey are still a vastly unexplored area compared to histories of other forms of art and literature.

Given the lack of scholarly interest, Güllü suggests that the early accounts narrating the histories of Turkey's theater can be loosely grouped under two different time spans: from the late Ottoman records to 1970s and from 1970s to 2000s. Apart from the critical early contributions from Niyazi Akı, Baha Dürder and Rauf Tuncay, there are two pioneering names who provided the most extensive research on the history of Turkey's theater: Refik Ahmet Sevengil (who produced works between

1930s-70s) and Metin And (who produced works between late 1950s to 80s). Sevengil appeared as the first historian to use archival materials in different languages rather than Ottoman Turkish; however, his archival material's scope was too narrow, and the interpretation of these archival material is limited. Metin And appears as a chief figure who provided the most broad research on Turkey's theater still to date, ranging from all kinds of different archival materials in different languages. His work is built on more than forty years of research and influenced the following generations at large. Because of his meticulous and elaborative study, his books are translated into different languages and generally accepted as one of the most comprehensive attempts to record the Turkey's theater history. Despite the richness of the historical materials in these studies, And's works miss out performance or reception analysis. Furthermore, there is an explicit ethnocentric discourse in And's works that paved the way to coin and strengthened the term "Turkish" theatre history, underlying an exclusionary agenda against non-Turkish groups, especially against Armenian theatre practitioners' works in the late Ottoman period (Güllü 2008, 15- 19). Although And's sources are pointing out to a multiethnic fabric of the Ottoman Theatre, he under-stressed the importance of Armenian theatre as the initial founder role within the history of Turkey's theater.

Beginning with the 2000s, a new perspective of theatre history writing emerged in the academic circles in Turkey that underlines the necessity to approach Turkey's theatre history within a cultural pluralist perspective because no single ethnocentric outlook would be useful to understand the theatrical activities of the Ottoman era. Güllü suggests that a cultural pluralist approach is a must to better engage with the Ottoman's multilingual, multiethnic, and multicultural theatre scene. Also, he signifies the need for the translations of the historical materials, memoirs and auto/biographies written in other languages into Turkish to create a transparency for the historical documents and opening the Turkish academia to these sources. (19-20). Mehmet Fatih Uslu suggests reading the history of Ottoman theatre within a perspective of conflicts and negotiations between different groups and insists on approaching Ottoman theatre without any standardizing perspective. Otherwise, it masks the potential for understanding the negotiations between these multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups that for the first time in the Ottoman history publicly exchange ideas and common artistic grounds in 19th century (Uslu 2014, 13-17). With acknowledging the former premises, Adak and Altınay point out the gap in the scholarship on theatre research in Turkey and its diasporas. They also problematize the lack of a critical eye and curiosity behind the historical works' politics of gender and sexuality (Adak, Altınay 187, 192).

As I mentioned above, Turkish nationalism was the dominant ideological paradigm while writing the histories of theatre in Turkey until the 2000s. One critical function of such supra ideologies is to cultivate silences to put forward a single group or people among others. In the histories of Turkey's theater, the lack of a cultural pluralist outlook created a severe under-representation of the non-Turkish and non-Muslim components while writing the theatrical activity in Ottoman Empire. Armenians were the main components of the theatrical activity in the Ottoman Empire and their involvement as theatre practitioners were either underrepresented or ignored in these historiographies. Thus, the accounts which are trivializing the non-Turkish theatre practitioners' efforts in the histories of Turkey's theater should be examined critically. Both And and Sevengil remained silent in different forms which marks the ethnocentric discourse behind these attempts. This ethnocentric approach which creates silences aims to veil the importance of Armenian theatre practitioner's pioneering role in shaping the theatrical activity in Turkey.

Armenians were the main group that introduced the modern theatre in the Ottoman Empire beginning from the late 18th century and developed it until the first quarter of 20th century. Catholic Mekhitarist Brotherhood in San Lazzaro island in Venice was crucial in developing the modern Armenian theatre in the 18th century (Zekiyani 2013, 19-20). In the monastery, Mekhitarist priests and students produced religious biblical themes and secular dramas and tragedies written in classical Armenian (Parlakian and Cowe 2000, x). Along with the historical and religious themed plays, they produced original theatrical comedies narrating the daily lives of the multi-ethnic communities living in the Ottoman Empire: "lively farces mostly written in the Armenian vernacular of Constantinople, involving characters drawn from motley Ottoman capital" (xi). These plays are not only written in Armenian. In contrast to the general acceptance of Şinasi's *Şair Evlenmesi* as the first Turkish theatrical play, the Mekhitarist brotherhood produced the first Turkish plays written in Armenian alphabet dating back to the late 18th century. These plays are comedies based on Jewish, Greek, Turkish and Armenian characters who confront in an everyday conflictual situation creating comedy mostly based on ethnic stereotypes (Manok 2013, 53-55). The theatrical activities started in the San Lazzaro island was transported to the Ottoman Empire, especially to İstanbul through some schools, mainly Raphealian Collage and others.

In 1859, the first professional theater *Aravelyan Tadron* [Oriental Theater] was established by Sirabiyon Hekimyan. In 1961, the first professional women actress Arusyak Papazyan stepped up on the stage in Aravelyan Tadron's *İki Ahbap Çavuşlar* production (Güllü 2008, 36). In 1867, Hagop Vartovyan's *Tiyatro-i Osmani Kumpanyası* [Ottoman Theatre Company] was established and Vartovyan had the 10-year

government license that enabled him to enjoy a monopoly of sorts. In *Tiyatro-i Osmani Kumpanyası*, Vartovyan staged “estimated 200 productions in Armenian and a similar number in Turkish.” (Kouyoumdjian, 2015). Hagop Vartovayan’s bilingual productions resulted in a very rich theatrical repertoire and popularized theater in the Ottoman capital. The company continued its theatrical activities until it was shot in 1878 by Abdulhamid II. The *İstibdat Dönemi* [Period of Autocracy] caused thirty years of control and censorship in all forms of art making including theatre. Güllü suggests that during this period, theater companies struggled with both financial problems and political pressure from the government authorities, yet it was able to survive thanks to the efforts of few dedicated actors and actresses (Güllü 2016, 43). With the 1908 Revolution and the end of the Abdülhamid II’s control on intellectual and cultural spheres, theatre again became one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the capital. Also, theatre has seen as an arena to communicate the revolutionary notions with the public not only by professional but also amateur groups: “the promulgation of the constitution was followed by an explosion in theater activities; The old theater groups that continued their theater activities from the pre-constitutional period, such as the Ahmet Fehim Company and the Minakyan Company, were suffocated under the pressure of new amateur groups” (Seçkin 2007, 11).

Up until 1915, the theatrical activity in the capital was very vibrant and theatre again emerged as one of the most popular forms of entertainment in the Empire. However, with the Armenian Genocide, which was the climax of the violence against Armenians in the Ottoman lands, irreversibly changed Armenian participation to the theatre activities in Turkey for sure. Lots of theatre practitioners, playwrights and technicians were murdered in the deportations. There were very few Armenian theatre practitioners remained in Turkey, and with the establishment of the new Republic, the ones who were still living in the Empire also had to leave the country because of the exclusionary cultural and national politics of the new Republic. After the Armenian Genocide, Genocide survivors began to build their lives in America, Europe, modern Armenia, Caucasus and Middle East under what Bardakjian calls as “post genocide Armenian Dispersion” (Bardakjian 2000, 230). They carried their theatrical understandings to their new countries and started doing theater in the emerging diasporas. In the context of Turkish Republic, Armenian theatre practitioners who survived genocide were banned from staging plays in Armenian which lasted from 1923 to 1946. Only after 1946, once a very popular and lively Armenian theater tradition turned into a form of community theater (Dalyanoğlu 2016, 4).

KVO is an attempt to make Muhsin Ertuğrul, one of the chief figures of this paradigm of silences, face the ghost of an Armenian theatre practitioner and a

silenced actress to create a confrontation with the history on the theatre stage. In the first chapter, I will look at how this confrontation happens, and where and how the silences occurred through the theoretical vocabulary produced by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past*. Also, I will try to examine KVO's impact on the ongoing denial and exclusion of Armenians in Turkey and try to understand how KVO disturbs the hegemonic narratives and ethnocentric ideologies by utilizing Rancière's concept of *dissensus*.

## 1.2 Communicating the Traumatic Pasts

Even though KVO does not openly stage any violent acts against its Armenian character in the context of Armenian Genocide, the play implicitly deals with the hidden violence of Armenian Genocide and its aftereffects. It is an event that everybody knows, talks about, but could not accept which makes it, as Ahiska calls, one of the "public secrets" (Ahiska 2014, 166) of Turkey's recent history. In the moments of catastrophic losses, collective or personal, the notion of time does not operate as its given progressiveness suggests and these "public secrets" always call for revisitation. Cathy Caruth who followed the Freudian trauma theory talks about traumatic events tendency to:

"repeat ... itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will .... The repetition at the heart of catastrophe ... emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind.... Trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature" (Caruth 1996, 2- 4).

The collective losses that are haunting the survivors, and the trauma's "unassimilated nature" causes a repetition that is marked by the nature of the relation with the lost object. Sometimes this object loss reveals itself on certain forms of attachments, mirroring the ambiguous relationship between the person's psyche and the lost object.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will closely examine Muhsin Ertuğrul's obsessive attachment to Shakespeare's *Hamlet* by juxtaposing Hamlet's and Muhsin's

inability to mourn over their losses within the given structure of KVO. Muhsin Ertuğrul's famous admiration to *Hamlet* is mostly understood as a strong indication of his pro-Westernism and his dedication to the humanist discourse which he believed that encompassed all Shakespeare's plays. However, I argue that in given the structure of KVO, this obsession with *Hamlet* could be read as Muhsin's traumatic revisiting of the 1911 production of *Hamlet*, which Muhsin and Vahram performed together. In this chapter, I will mainly use Freud's conceptualizations of mourning and melancholia appeared in his 1917 text *Mourning and Melancholia* and Cathy Caruth's contribution to Freudian theory of trauma through the concept of double telling of the traumatic event.

### 1.3 Performing the Past and the Performer as Witness

There is a growing literature in performance theory that explores the relationship between history and performance of the historical event and historical figures. In *Representing the Past*, Canning and Postlewait argue that the historians' mission is to trace human actions that happened in the past, to configure the representation of the past events in a narrative structure while recording the history (Canning, Postlewait 2012, 20). Their arguments' significance lies in the fact that the archive, which is the main source of the historian is likewise a form of representation of the historical event:

"The "original" documents are not the events themselves; they are representations by the historical agents and eyewitnesses, who themselves must negotiate their own double binds within the codes of representation" (Canning, Postlewait 2012, 14).

By making this claim, they carve out a shared space for historians and playwrights, and that is producing representations to create the plots of human actions (Canning, Postlewait 2012, 19). This theoretical opening creates opportunities to see the archive beyond its prioritization as "proximity to real" (Schneider 2014, 3) and clears ways to reconsider it from the perspective of present struggles, especially when dealing with the difficult histories.

Theories of performance heavily deals with the problems and potentialities of rep-



resenting the traumatic pasts. It is a serious bargain since misrepresentation or problematic representation can reproduce the already destructive power of the traumatic experiences. However, there is also the demand for going back, an un-closable attachment that drives creators to further explore the nature of the trauma and its effects on both individual and collective levels. As a theorist working on the relation between history and performance, Frederick Rokem suggests that the potential of reconfiguration that performance presents can cool down the “destructive energies” of history to make sense of the traumatic historical events in the present moment. He poses a “double perspective” when dealing with performing history:

"On the one hand, such aesthetic representations present a lived immediacy of the historical event, an immersion into that historical reality, including the limited understanding (or denial) of what is happening as the events unfold according to their sometimes perverse logic; while at the same time, these aesthetic representations also include some form of more general retrospective understanding of their consequences for us in the present, in particular regarding the ethical (though not moralistic) dimensions of these events" (Rokem 2015, 22).

This “double perspective” is a valuable contribution to see what the theatrical performances can achieve and also its potential to better make sense of the nature of the traumatic histories through today’s glance. Rokem also sees a great potential for performers to bear witness to the historical event that they are re-enacting. Rokem’s idea reminds an earlier account asserting the same quality to the performers, Bertolt Brecht’s notion of acting from an eyewitness point of view. Although Brecht wrote nearly all of his plays by using the technique of historicizing the present struggles, his idea of “eyewitness” performer (demonstrator) is not introduced as an account specifically developed for historical performances. Similar to the Brechtian concept of performer as an eyewitness, Rokem develops the concept called “hyper historian” which attempts to bring a historical witness quality to the performer. Although the term appears as a speculative one, what Rokem stresses is the potential of the performer to reconsider the historical past by recreating it, which I think also borrows a lot from Brecht’s conceptualization of Epic theater and one of its key elements, *Verfremdung- Effekt*.

In the third chapter of this thesis, I will look at KVO’s strategies to perform history and the actors’ potential to bear witness to the historical events. To do that, I will mainly employ Brecht’s and Rokem’s ideas of theatrical event and their different accounts on performers as witnesses. I closely read the play along with the formerly

mentioned theories and lastly, I will look at both Hamlet's and Muhsin's potential to be regarded as historians/ witnesses in the structures of KVO and *Hamlet*.

#### 1.4 *Kim Var Orada* and its Sources

There is a growing interest in the alternative theatre scene in İstanbul to produce plays dealing with contested pasts with a certain stress on challenging the normative and hegemonic understandings of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality. Biographical plays appeared as one of the most attractive genres to theatre practitioners, especially in the last decade in İstanbul. These plays break free from the traditional biographical narrative of glorifying a heroic figure; on the contrary, they build their narratives either to question the validity of the mystification around a historical figure or to re-introduce a forgotten, an underrepresented person to the present day. KVO is one of the attempts that explores the possibilities of this genre along with the other biographical plays that mostly deal with a historical period through a witnessing of real-life characters. There are new biographical plays produced both as productions of translations and original texts. One of the examples of these plays is BGST's feminist collective work *Zabel*<sup>1</sup>, which is centered around Zabel Esseyan's autobiographical work *Silihdari Bardezneri* [The Gardens of Silihdar], and *Averagneru Mech* [Among the Ruins]. The play explores the famous Armenian writer's life from her birth in Üsküdar, İstanbul to her disappearance in the Soviet prisons. Written and performed by a full female cast, *Zabel* utilizes the tools of critical feminist history writing and theatre to deal with Zabel Esseyan's life story, and re-introduces her to the contemporary discourse as an Armenian feminist writer who struggled for her freedom to write and express herself under the authoritative regimes. Similar to KVO, *Zabel* discusses the validity of the historiographies narrating the Ottoman Armenian experience in the late Ottoman era and employs a feminist intervention to the denialist and exclusionist politics of history writing. Also, it deals with the issue of witnessing and looking for ways to achieve a possible feminist testimony through a theatrical medium. Another example is from Çıplak Ayaklar Kumpanyası [Bare Feet Company], a performance work called *Sen Balık Değilsin ki!*. This performance concentrates on an Armenian public intellectual Hrant Dink's murder through a genre close to dance-theater and performance documentary. *Sen Balık Değilsin ki!* focuses on the issues of collective loss, memory and trauma. The other

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<sup>1</sup>To see the fragment of the play please visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y5SZI3IRPzc>

examples include *Hayal-i Temsil* by İstanbul Municipal Theater, *Unutulan* by Yersiz Kumpanya, *İz* by Galata Perform and many more.

As a biographical play, KVO centrally uses two memoirs as its backbone. One is Muhsin Ertuğrul's *Benden Sonra Tufan Olmasın!* [Let There Be No Deluge After Me!], and the other one is Vahram Papazyan's *Sırdıs Barktı* [My Debt of Gratitude] written in old East Armenian in 1958. Papazyan claimed that he wrote this memoir in order to pay his gratitude to the theatre practitioners and intellectuals that he worked with in Turkey (Dalyanoğlu 2017, 197). Unfortunately, neither *Sırdıs Barktı* nor his other memoir *Hedatartz Hayyatsk* translated in Turkish, which is another instant showing the one-sidedness of the historical accounts narrating this transformation period in Turkey. Papazyan's memoir enabled KVO to contrast different narrations of this transition period and paves the way for a better critical engagement with the existing historical material. While creating the other ghost character Arusyak/ Latife Hanım, the group is inspired by a short writing appeared in Darülbedayi Magazine called "Temaşamızda Türk Kadını" by M. Kemal dated back to 1931. Even though it is not a biographical account, the group used this material to imagine the historical conditions of Arusyak/ Latife. The other inspirational base of KVO is a short documentary play *Muhsin ve Vahram* written by Fırat Güllü in 2013 with the collaboration of BGST and Berberyan Kumpanyası.<sup>2</sup> Later, BGST used this text to further develop it into a two-act play, as a product of a vast research conducted on Turkey's theatre history.

KVO premiered in 2016 and had a smooth run until the Coronavirus pandemic.<sup>3</sup> The play is a work of collective regie group both written and directed by Banu Açıkdeniz (Arusyak/ Latife), Cüneyt Yalaz (Muhsin Ertuğrul), İlker Yasin Keskin (Vahram Papazyan) and Özgür Eren. The project advisor is Ömer Faruk Kurhan. The music is orchestrated by Aybars Gülümsel, the décor is devised by Özgür Eren and the lighting design is made by Levent Soy and Özgür Eren. The play is embraced both by the theatre goers and critics as a substantial work of theater. Further, Cüneyt Yalaz won two best actor awards, and İlker Yasin Keskin won two best supporting actor awards based on their successful performances in the play. Also, the writers of the play took two best original play awards from different award ceremonies.<sup>4</sup>

I believe KVO is a part of this curiosity to explore the Turkey's recent history from

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<sup>2</sup>To read the text of the play please visit: <http://firatgullu.blogspot.com/2014/06/oyun-muhsin-ve-vahram-2-versiyon10.html>

<sup>3</sup>To see the fragment of the play please visit: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq\\_aNUPPsSg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sq_aNUPPsSg)

<sup>4</sup><https://tiyatrolar.com.tr/tiyatro/kim-var-orada>

a theatrical medium, and as a theatrical play it questions its own predecessors, its own foundations to search for the silenced and underrepresented events and people of the Turkey's theater history.



## 2. MAKING HISTORIES, MAKING SILENCES

*Kim Var Orada? Muhsin Bey'in Son Hamleti* [Who's There? The Last Hamlet of Mr. Muhsin] deals with the transformation period of Turkey's theatre from its latest stage in the Ottoman Empire to the modern Turkish Republic and challenges the validity of historical accounts and dominant ideological perspectives narrating this rather toilsome and difficult transition. KVO is centered around one of the most influential figures of this period, Muhsin Ertuğrul, and invites the audience to his study room when he was writing his memoir, remembering the past events and people that shaped the history of "Turkish Theater". Generations of mainstream historians of theater in Turkey agreed on the centrality and essentiality of Muhsin Ertuğrul's historical role as the "founding father" figure of Modern Turkish theater; celebrated him as a miracle, a "masterless master" and "the apostle of the Turkish Theater". By acknowledging the aforementioned point, some others criticized him for his western-centric view of theatre and accused him of being an imitator who hindered the potential for an authentic Turkish theatre tradition to thrive, and criticized his authoritative leanings (And 1969, 58-59), (And 2004, 159). Although the historical importance of Muhsin Ertuğrul's efforts to further the theatrical activity in Turkey is obvious and crucial, these laudatory, clapping or criticisms culminated in one big myth of a legend, whose bold existence overshadowed both the ones who were equally served to that purpose and also the rich and vibrant pluralist culture of theater that he was also part of.

KVO destabilizes and bruises this heroic myth of Muhsin Ertuğrul and proposes an alternative engagement with it. These hegemonic historiographies silence the existence of equally significant efforts of non-Muslim and non-Turkish contributors who were the first initiators of Western-style theatre in Turkey. Muhsin Ertuğrul himself watched them on stages, learned theatre from them, and performed with them before the Republican era. Armenian theatre professionals were the major components of the formation of a modern theater in the Ottoman Empire along with Greeks, Turks, Jews and Kurds. When the one-sided historiographies of Turkey's theatre are reexamined, there emerges an ideological project that they share in common

which provides traces of why the history of Turkey's theatre is written along those lines: The desire to create a new Turkish nation, which is based on Turkish national identity required a whole new "Turkish" history and "Turkish" subjectivities to promote a coherent narrative of a nation state, the prototypes and role models for the public and future generations. Women theatre practitioners' efforts were also discarded from this picture or reduced to be represented as domesticated role models. They favored some women as the perfect representation of the prototype of a modern Turkish woman while abject others as undesirable subjects.

I argue that KVO as an artwork creates *dissensus* within the general paradigm of history writing of Turkey's theatre by showing how the multicultural theatre activities of the late Ottoman era are silenced in the hands of ethnocentric history writing. Also, I will deal with the Muhsin Ertuğrul cult by looking at how he himself silenced this past and how he silenced and censored his own personal history with the help of the play's interventions, his own memoir and writings, and alternative accounts. Another thing I want to go over is how the women theatre practitioners of this era are being misrepresented or neglected by the same historiographies. Then I will conclude that by destabilizing hegemonic historiographies, dominant accounts, and introducing the silences and power relations/mechanisms beyond these silences; KVO brings a fresh confrontation with the history of the Turkish theatre. Also, as an artwork, KVO creates dissensus in the sensory fabric of society and offers alternative engagements with the past; therefore, opens the path for different future historiographies.

## 2.1 Who's There?

The play opens with a scene in which the audience is invited to Muhsin Ertuğrul's study room when he was writing his memoir *Benden Sonra Tufan Olmasın!*. The usage of décor is very simple: a writing desk, a coffee table, two chairs, a coat hanger, and a small library with few books offering a sense of an open space to the stage. The lighting suggests nighttime and a dream-like atmosphere with its distinct usage of color blue and shades of cold white. The old Muhsin writes his memories on a piece of paper and reads it mindfully. A sudden impulse to sleep captures and distracts him; however, he resists this doziness while the color blue becomes more dominant, underlying the ambiguity of whether Muhsin is falling to sleep or awake. Abruptly, Muhsin stands up and walks on the front center of the stage and speaks

straight to the audience:

**MUHSİN** : Something is rotten in this state! It is haunted by ghosts!<sup>1</sup>

The opening line suggests an immediate relation with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is Marcellus's comment on the current state of Denmark after seeing the ghost of a dead King Hamlet.<sup>2</sup> Muhsin continues to speak to the audience, summarizing the scenes where Hamlet meets with the ghost and quotes the lines where he cries out to the ghost to find out the reasons behind his turning back from death.<sup>3</sup> When dramatic action at its peak in an eerie atmosphere, Muhsin suddenly cuts the former uncanny performance. He starts to comment on Hamlet in a cold, didactic, and serious manner:

**MUHSİN** : Now this is important. It is believed that if a dead person appears to the living, his soul is not at peace. But here it is not the ghost who is unable to find peace, but Hamlet himself. In fact, the ghost could be seen as Hamlet's subconscious.

What are ghosts and what they tell about the relationship between the dead and living? According to Shakespearean demonology, ghosts are the spirits of dead persons who are the representations of holiness and purity or demonic imitations that lure the living into damnation. Ghosts also could be delusions imagined as a result of melancholy and despair (Gibson, Esra 2017, 102). Hamlet's first reaction to the ghost is to understand whether it is a demon disguised as his father and trying to drive him mad or his father's soul's appearance who needs an act of just revenge. Thus, the immediate question pops up: why does Muhsin talk about Hamlet and ghosts in the middle of the writing of his memoir?

While Muhsin is recommending a psychoanalytic reading to the play, he hears unidentifiable voices coming from no specific direction. Then there starts music with a dramatic undertone and two ghost figures enter the stage. One is Vahram Papazyan (a famous Armenian actor who Muhsin referred to him as his first teacher).

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<sup>1</sup>The translations are based on the unpublished copy of the play.

<sup>2</sup>"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark." (1.4.90).

<sup>3</sup>"But tell why thy canonized bones, hearsed in death, /have burst their cerements; why the sepulchre, /wherein we saw thee quietly inurn'd, /hath oped his ponderous and marble jaws, /to cast thee up again What may this mean" (1.4.47-51)

And the other one is Arusyak Hanım (A Muslim woman named Latife who is disguised as an Armenian in order to act since Muslim women could not step up on the stage). They circle Muhsin and the tense music gives way to a playful tango melody. Vahram invites Arusyak/Latife to dance, she accepts and the two start to dance around Muhsin who watches them in sheer perplexity, trying to make sense of what is happening. After some delicate moves, Vahram approaches Muhsin's writing desk and takes a letter from the pile of sheets. It is the letter that Vahram sent to Muhsin in 1964, asking Muhsin to help him to go on stage in İstanbul again, after the forty-five years of silence between the two. The two ghosts mischievously pretend to give Muhsin the letter and invoke curiosity in him. Muhsin tries to catch the letter; however, ghosts always find a way to hide it. Through the end of the choreography, Muhsin becomes frustrated and tries to get the letter by pulling it strongly from Vahram's hand. After a series of pulling and pushing, he loses the center of gravity and falls into the Vahram's arms and embraces him. Vahram permits him to hug for a second and then harshly pushes Muhsin out of his arms. Arusyak/Latife takes Muhsin's head into her chest and consoles him. Later ghosts decide to give the letter to Muhsin and exit the stage. The choreography ends with Muhsin taking the letter, going back to his writing desk (the same position while he was staring thoughtfully at his writings), and he contemplates the envelope. He initiates to open it, but he suddenly cries out, as if he woke up from a nightmare, asking "Who's there?".

It is the opening line of *Hamlet* when Bernardo, one of the King's guards, yells to understand the unidentifiable voices that he hears. It is an exclamation for clarity rather than a rational question to record who is coming in and out since there is a ghost appearing in the castle of Elsinore. The need for clarity for the guard is crucial since the protection of the King's castle is given to his command. Just like Bernardo, while Muhsin is waking up from his nightmarish fantasy, he feels the threat against his guardianship for his memories, which are being disturbed by these ghosts, as if they question the validity of his writings. They haunt him and drive him to a dangerous and playful dance. They mock him, make him sweat and run from one place to another. They distract him from what he was writing and try to channel his attention to the unanswered request that Papazyan sent to him. In the following scene, the ghosts proclaim their wish, they want to stage *Hamlet* for the one last time as they did in 1911, Muhsin as Leartes and Vahram as Hamlet. It was the first time *Hamlet* performed in Odeon theatre, İstanbul. And Arusyak/Latife, who was not allowed to play Ophelia in that production, wants to play her part in this new version.

Even though Muhsin could not make sense of the ghosts' appearance, this proposal is very hard to turn down for him given the centrality of the play *Hamlet* in his life.



*Hamlet* is his favourite play and Shakespeare is his favourite playwright. After his introduction to the play by Othello Kamil (Kamil Rıza), he is heavily withdrawn into the play and could not escape from its great impact throughout his life: “I wouldn’t be exaggerating if I say that Shakespeare’s works and most importantly *Hamlet* dominated forty-eight years of fifty-year-old career” (Ertuğrul 1993, 144). In his memoir *Benden Sonra Tufan Olmasın!*, he talks about both *Hamlet* and Shakespeare at a great deal, and sees the play as “great actors’ common passion” (Ertuğrul 1989, 183). He staged eight different *Hamlet* productions and performed the title role in a few. Interestingly, he not only talks about the productions he staged but also attempts to map out all the different productions of the play that he saw throughout his life. He mostly sees performances in Europe including France, England, Germany, Soviet Russia, Austria, Sweden and the list goes on. He visits some theaters in Europe and joins their production processes and takes notes. He analyzes different versions of Hamlets that those “great actors” acted on the stage and provides analyses, comparisons, and contrasts different interpretations of both the play and the character. He collects photographs, newspaper articles, magazines and books written on the play, seriously engaging with *Hamlet* with a great effort. It is rather surprising to see too much information on *Hamlet* in a memoir; however, it is a very telling clue in terms of why the ghosts offer to play *Hamlet*, a proposal very hard to reject for Muhsin. But what does it mean to play *Hamlet* again with Vahram and Arusyak/Latife Hanım? What would be its consequences?

Muhsin Ertuğrul refers to Vahram Papazyan only four times in his four hundred and fifty eight pages long memoir; however, those passages are very striking and strong, signaling a close relationship they had before the Republican era. He refers to Vahram as his first teacher who has been really influential in terms of his distinct acting ability, gentle manners, artistic discipline and work ethic. Muhsin Ertuğrul praised him as “the only actor who couldn’t be controlled” (117). Vahram Papazyan was born in 1888 in Samatya, İstanbul. His father wanted him to be a priest and sent him to the Venetian Mekhitarist brotherhood (Dalyanoğlu 2017, 195). Papazyan was one of the actors who met with theater in the Mekhitarist Monastery in San Lazaro island which helped to cultivate generations of Armenian intellectuals and is one of the important centers for Armenian modernity (Manok 2013, 28). Although he was sent there by his father to be a priest, he fell in love with theater in the Monastery. He decided to stay in Italy and became an actor. He started his professional acting career as an intern of Ermete Novelli<sup>4</sup>. After finishing his internship, he turned

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<sup>4</sup>Ermeti Novelli (5 March 1851 – 30 January 1919) is a famous Italian actor, comedian and playwright. He was praised for creating one of the most influential artistic centers in Rome called Casa di Goldoni [Goldoni’s House], which is said to be as successful as Comédie Française: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100240680>

back to İstanbul and appeared on the capital's stages. Muhsin and Vahram became roommates after Muhsin was thrown out of his uncle and big sister's house because of his passion for theater (Ertuğrul 1989, 123-125). They acted together within the Sahne-i Milliye-i Osmaniye [Ottoman National Theater] established by Burhanettin Bey under the artistic rule of Reşat Rıdvan (111-112). In 1911, Vahram and Muhsin staged the first production of *Hamlet* together in İstanbul, Muhsin as Leartes playing his part in Turkish and Vahram played Hamlet in Armenian. This bilingual staging can be interpreted as their wish to reach as much audience as possible on practical grounds, but also signals their openness to create a bilingual space where languages find equal opportunity to be represented in a public space. As I pointed out earlier, Muhsin Ertuğrul does not mention him as much in his memoir, but when he was commenting on his departure from İstanbul, he cannot help himself but wrote this single line: "Vahram turned back to Italy, then the [İstanbul] stage is left to rats" (136). However, the years later, in 1964, when Vahram Papazyan sent a letter to Muhsin Ertuğrul to act together again in İstanbul, he either did not respond to this letter or he never received it. We may never achieve a valid answer to this question.

The other ghostly figure who asks to play *Hamlet* is Arusyak Hanım. First, she is introduced to the audience as an Armenian actress who is recalling the examples of famous prima donnas like Eliza Binemeciyan or Mari Nivart. However, later, she is revealed as Latife Hanım, a Muslim woman who could not resist the need for stepping up on stage. Since the Muslim women are banned from the stage, she disguised as an Armenian, and re-named herself as Arusyak. The inspiration for this character is based on a very short writing published by M. Kemal in Darülbedayi Magazine in 1931. M. Kemal suggests that the first Turkish woman who got on stage is K. Hanım, who performed in a play in Nazilli, in 1889. KVO critically re-imagines the story of "K. Hanım" to discuss the women's role in this transition period. Arusyak/Latife could not play the Ophelia part in the 1911 production of *Hamlet*, and her wish is to play Ophelia this time.

For Muhsin, accepting the ghosts' proposal is not an easy choice. Staging *Hamlet* again with these ghosts will force him to remember the long-silenced existence of these voices. Not only the individual faces will reappear but also the whole multi-cultural tradition of Ottoman Theater will be evoked. It also challenges his unique "one man" myth of the Turkey's theater whose efforts built the "Turkish" theater "from the scratch". By really asking "Who's there?", he will have to question the validity of this narrative and confront both the personal and collective events that may undermine the coherent picture of national history writing of theatre in Turkey and his unique "father" role in it. The question of whether they manage to play *Hamlet* again opens the potential for re-constructing the past by questioning the

“rotteness” and “hauntedness” of the entire history writing tradition of Turkey’s theatre. So, will these three manage to play Hamlet again? Will these three major constituents of Turkey’s theater can come together to narrate a unique history of Turkey’s theater, embracing both the Ottoman legacy and Republican era, without silencing and ignoring one another? KVO builds itself on this tense dramatic structure and calls Muhsin Ertuğrul to confront the history of Turkey’s theater and his unique role in it. At a first glance, Muhsin becomes a Hamletic figure whose responsibility is to sustain revenge/justice by remembering the long-forgotten history of the cultural pluralist theatre environment of Ottoman Turkey. Vahram situated as the King Hamlet whose request is still waiting to be answered and Arusyak/Latife appears as a ghostly Ophelia, who is discarded from the picture and reduced to be represented as mad and melancholic for the insistence she showed to not to fit the symbol of a “perfect” Turkish woman. And throughout the play, the deal of playing *Hamlet* for the one last time is negotiated while they are remembering the past events and people that shaped this contested history.

## 2.2 Demystifying the Muhsin Ertuğrul Cult

If I knew that tomorrow the apocalypse would break, I would open another theatre today (Ertuğrul 1989, 41).

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In the introduction of his memoir, Muhsin Ertuğrul states the importance of theater in his life with this striking quote. The reason behind this deep dedication is his unending love and curiosity for the art of theatre and the belief that theatre can cure all the ills of a society (41). This belief has strong roots seeded in Ancient Greek, and as advocated by Aristotle that theatre (specifically tragedy) can be seen as an apparatus to instruct the public by teaching them the essential virtues and basics of how to be a proper citizen. The placement of the art of theater had different guises and functions over the course of history. When it comes to the early Republican era in Turkey, theatre again appeared as an instructor’s tool to educate the masses and to introduce them to the essential ideologies of the current Republican regime. And Muhsin Ertuğrul was the chief instructor. In the play, when Vahram was criticizing him for postponing to stage *Hamlet*, he teases him for being over-monitoring and mentions his project of “educating” the public:

**VAHRAM** : Your soul has shrivelled up, my friend!... Go and be an administrator somewhere!... You always liked that kind of thing, right? Remember that sign you made on how to watch a play: “Don’t eat sunflower seeds! Don’t talk with your neighbour! Don’t smoke a water pipe!”

It is one of the examples which shows the spheres that Muhsin Ertuğrul wants to control because of his educational duties. He not only tried to control the artistic work but also aimed to instruct how to perceive and react to a play. This even leads him to define an audience consciousness by publishing directives like when and how the audience can clap, cheer, cough. In fact, this is only a single aspect of his greater educational duties for creating Europeanized and modern habitats for theater. After the establishment of the Republic, Ertuğrul was commissioned to return to Turkey from Germany and be the head of Darülbedayi (the only public theatre at the time). The new Turkish state, which has just established needed intellectuals in all possible areas, and the theatre was seen as one of the primary tools to develop Turkish national consciousness and to propagate the new regime’s ideals. Given the centrality of Muhsin Ertuğrul’s role in this project and his strong dedication to his mission, sometimes he finds himself in a clear opposition with the regime; however, his pro-westernist outlook and the regime’s idea of closing the gap between Western civilizations become their conflating aim. Muhsin Ertuğrul’s idealism and hardworking character paved the way for a determination that gave him his pioneering and unique position in the history of Turkey’s theater.

In the late years of his life, with the encouragement of his surroundings and theatre enthusiasts, he decided to write a memoir where he will talk about the establishment of Turkish theatre and his witnessing to this era. As an extension of his educational role, he wanted to investigate the history of Turkish theater, and his “desired goal is to reveal the section of the Turkish theater history that lives and ends” with him (43). He claimed that he will not write a personal history, which is futile and unnecessary. *Benden Sonra Tufan Olmasın!* may be one of the most impersonal memoirs ever written. He only talks about some details of his personal life in the early sections where he mentioned how he has fallen in love with theatre with Karagöz and Orta Oyunu (theatre in the round) performances, Minakyan’s productions, his father’s positive influence over him and the despair he experienced as a child when he died, and lastly the uncle who died in the Greek War of Independence. He mostly talks about his trips to Europe, Soviet Russia and America in order to research for theatre and cinema, and his own struggle to build a national theatre in Turkey.

In the introduction of his memoir, he wanted to assure the readers about the

“reality” and objectivity of the book in a very confusing manner:

"Various moments of lifestyles [yaşam biçimleri] inherent in an elderly person are hidden in the memories ... [my memoir writing] is not an act of remembering because remembering contains forgetting. It is not about memory either... But if, [memories] like mine, have never been erased, just as fresh as they are preserved in a can or look as immaculate as fresh vegetables and fruits, it should count reopening and revealing as a reminder of the forgotten. Because the past events are still freshly stored in the mind's library, volume by volume" (42-43).

By contrasting what he has done in this book with other forms of memory writing, he comes to this conclusion: his memoir is not a typical one because the memories he talks about are not simple “memories” which are products of mutual process of remembering and forgetting. His memories are never forgotten, fresh as ripe fruits and vegetables, suggesting a historical reliability for the reader. He wants to situate his witnessing as a document rather than a “simple” memory, which bears the potential of fictionality with its openness to forgetting as a type of remembering. He does not explain why his memories (in this case they are categorically cannot be accepted as ones) carry this potential while others lack from it. In fact, the issue here is not an epistemological speculation, rather an ideological construction that requires soundness for his writings from a shortcut of the power of his memory so as to convince the readers that they are reading an accurate account on the history of Turkey's theater.

One of the main issues KVO put into the crisis is this utterance of objectivity and the claim of “reality”. In a scene where Muhsin was trying to decide whether which memories should be kept in the memoir or not, he struggles to choose between his writings to put in his book while he was reading the chapter titles:

**MUHSİN** : Vahram Papazyan, the only actor who could not be controlled... Mardiros Minakyan's contribution to our theatre... Kinar Sivacıyan and the Ferah Theatre... Climbing to the lead roles in the Bine-meciyan Company... (Pauses.) Yan, yan, yan... Whatever [yani].

This comic illustration of Muhsin while he was calculating how many Armenian names would be enough to be represented in the history of Turkey's theatre is very telling in terms of his self-censor mechanisms, which will eventually end up silencing

historical events and people. Right after this blockage, Vahram enters the stage as he was a voice in his head:

- MUHSİN** : There's no need to mention the Binemeciyan Company...
- VAHRAM** : No need...
- MUHSİN** : It was only a very short period...
- VAHRAM** : Very short...
- MUHSİN** : (While erasing his writing...) And what's all this about climbing the lead roles
- VAHRAM** : Like you're singing your own praises...
- MUHSİN** : Exactly.
- VAHRAM** : Clearly.
- MUHSİN** : And anyway, it looks like a very one-sided account.
- VAHRAM** : It has to be neutral!

While Muhsin is in the middle of the selection of his archival material, deciding which ones should be kept and discarded; Vahram mocks with his attempt of classification, which is based on the criterion of a sheer act of calculation of how many Armenian names would be enough to do not offend the Turkish national narrative. Moreover, his gesture of erasing his own writing becomes a *gestus* implying the act of silencing not only as a personal initiative but a whole tradition of history writing that discards any “overstressed” associations with Armenian theatre practitioners’ contributions.

The relationship between silencing and history writing vastly explored by Michel-Rolph Trouillot in his book *Silencing the Past*. Very early in the book, Trouillot states that in the vernacular use of the term history, history signifies both “the facts of the matter” and “the narrative” of those facts. It implies both “what happened” and “that which is said to have happened”. The first usage of the term put an emphasis on the sociohistorical processes; and the second is on the knowledge or the story of those processes (Trouillot 2015, 20-21). However, these usages cause ambiguity because they may sometimes overlap, but sometimes create distances from one another. This makes the boundaries between these two tokens often quite fluid. He asserts that the overlaps and the distances between these two qualities of historicity are not suitable to a general formula (22).

The historians who are coming from a positivist tradition heavily underlined the distinction between the “historical world” and what is being said or written about it. Considering that, constructivists adopt a perspective that stresses the overlap

between the historical process and its narrativization. These have appeared as two different strategies to overcome the ambiguities that history writing lies on the table. However, Trouillot criticizes these accounts on the basis of their stubborn and biased thinking that encloses their approach to this phenomenon only as a dichotomy (in the sense that choosing one side or the other), and their ignorance of the effects of power relations inherent in the nature history writing. By hiding the power relations “behind a naive epistemology”, positivists suggest that the more the distance between the sociohistorical processes and its knowledge, the easier to claim scientific validity and “professionalism” (23). On the other hand, constructivists refused the autonomy of the sociohistorical process and subjects operating in that history, all together. Thus, positivists ended up “fetishizing” the facts, factuality, archive and objectivity, and masking power structures whereas constructivist accounts accept historical narratives as “one fiction among the others” disabling themselves to come up with any full account of history (25).

Trouillot thinks that the one-sidedness of these accounts withdraws them from generating a more complex theoretical outlook which promises to treat history both as knowledge and narrative. Embracing this ambiguity suffices to track down the power relations operating between these overlaps and distances. Trouillot states that “History is always produced in a historical context and historical actors are also narrators” (44). Thus, not only the history writers but also the people involved in history have a potential to narrate the history as agents, actors and subjects (45). In order to analyze the power relations within a narrative, people involving the historical process should be approached as such. Thus, instead of prioritizing certain definitions of history, it is important to understand the processes and conditions of productions of historical narratives. And there lies the significant part of history writing, the silences: “Only through that overlap can we discover the differential exercise of power that makes some narratives possible and silences others.” (47). It is a powerful observation proposing the idea that the silencing is already inherent in any historical narrative. One has to investigate the traces of power relations in order to map out how and when silencings have occurred in a historical text.

According to Trouillot, silences enter the process of historical narrative at four critical moments. The first one is the “fact creation” (the selection of the sources); the second is the “fact assembly” (making of the archive); the third is the “fact retrieval (narrativization); and lastly the “retrospective significance” (making of history) (38). Since the power relations are inherent in the fabric of history writing, it is unavoidable for a historical account to be free of silences. However, Trouillot was cautious here to differentiate between different silences and states that “not all silences are equal”. Considerably, tracking power relations as constitutive elements

in a narrative necessitates different deconstructions of these silences, in a variety of ways (39).

If we accept the hybridity of Muhsin Ertuğrul's book as something between a historical book and a personal record; he writes under the influence of positivist notions of history writing. Since KVO situated itself on the very moment of Muhsin's writing of the memoir, the play enables to track down how silences may have been introduced in his writing process.

As it can be detected in the scene I mentioned above between Vahram and Muhsin, the act of silencing is one of the main issues KVO brings up to discussion. When Muhsin was deciding his narrative components, he silenced his own sources (memories) about the Armenian theatre practitioners' efforts. His silencing operates not only against the "forbidden" topics that cannot be written within a Turkish nationalist paradigm. He also silenced and censored crucial sides of his own identity:

**MUHSİN** : My father, Hüsnü Bey, was a treasurer at the Minister of Foreign Affairs. He married twice. I was born to his second wife. My mother, Fatma Verdich, was of German origin. (Pauses in thought.) My mother, Fatma Hanım, was of German origin... My mother was a Muslim of German origin... a German Muslim?... My mother was Muslim... Oh, who cares? Who cares what she was or where she was from? I'm not writing a personal history here, I'm writing the history of our theatre. (Erases what he has written. Then another memory comes to his mind...) Aha! My father bought me a magic lantern. This played a huge role in my interest in theatre.

As I mentioned earlier, Muhsin Ertuğrul talks about his father and his positive influence over him at a great deal in relation to theater and arts, but he silences his mother. After an extensive period of research on Muhsin Ertuğrul, Efdal Sevinçli finds his mother's German origin based on Muhsin Ertuğrul's birth certificate at Şehir Tiyatroları archives (Sevinçli 1990, 4). Also, Vahram Papazyan provides this information in his memoir *Sırdıs Barktı*. No other historians, his contemporaries or Muhsin Ertuğrul himself ever talked about his Germanness in any written material. It is a very cogent information that explains why he kept visiting Germany for many times and why he never experienced a language problem in his theatre research in Germany whereas he had particular difficulties in France. It also explains his artistic efforts in Germany; acting and directing films in German in the early 1920s. Since



the Turkish theater's father's being a half German can arouse suspicions around his patriotic image, neither Muhsin nor the historians and researchers brought up his ethnic origins. In the play, Muhsin's overemphasis to his father in his memoir is elaborated as a strategy for him to distance himself from his mother's German origins.

His overall aim of writing the history of Turkish theater always comes as a justifiable standpoint for his acts of silencing both at personal and collective levels. His cultic position as a monk-like figure who dedicated his life to the flourishing of Turkish Theater ended up forcing him to mask his personality and personal history. In the introduction of his memoir, he sees this deprivation of the personal image as a following duty of his educational deeds. Formulation of his memoir as a history book also caused by this same urge. He does not want to "waste time" by talking about his personal experiences, he silences the personal for the sake of a "nation's education". It is in the same ideological line producing heroic, soldier-like figures that show their dedication to Turkish nation by sacrificing themselves for the greater well-being of the country. However, it works as a silencing mechanism that reveals itself in self-censorship, concealing the truths for the sake of the mono-culturalist ideology of the new Turkish State.

His unwillingness to talk about rising to the lead roles in Binemeciyan Company is another instance of the same drive, however with a difference. As suggested by Trouillot, not all silences are equal. The Armenian identity was (and may still is) accepted as a threat to the Turkish national identity. Thus, Muhsin felt the need to meet a certain balance when he was talking about the Armenian legacy of the Turkey's theater. In his comprehensive research on Turkey's theater history, Ahmet Sevensil talks about Muhsin Ertuğrul's success at Binemeciyan Company and becoming the lead actor of the company (Keskin, 2015). However, Ertuğrul discarded this information from his memoir when he was talking about his first years of acting career, which he colorfully and enthusiastically portrayed. It is crucial to note that Muhsin Ertuğrul was also obliged to take part of the reigning ethnocentric ideology which set the paradigm for history writing. By silencing this information, he partook in the calculative reasoning that governed the relations with the Armenian population of the Republic which takes its roots from the late Ottoman exclusionary politics against non-Muslim populations of Turkey. In this scene, he is depicted as trying to solve a mathematical problem, trying to decide how much Armenian representation would be enough, echoing how many Armenian people living in Turkey would not create a threat to Turkish nation state. This ill logic reminds the displacement of Armenians from Turkey that led to Armenian Genocide. In the play, this overlap of Muhsin's act of silencing the personal history

as an echo of a general paradigm of silencing of Armenian identity is opened up with the criticism of Muhsin's participation in denialist history writing. In one scene, Vahram notices his name on one of the Muhsin's writings and wants to read what Muhsin had written about him:

**VAHRAM** : “Before the First World War there was one actor in our world of theatre who truly deserved his reputation, Vahram Papazyan”. Can you read the rest?

**MUHSİN** : Is that all? (Glances at the page.) It goes the same.

**VAHRAM** : Please read it.

**MUHSİN** : “After a five-year research trip, the actor returned to Istanbul. He began to perform his repertoire in Armenian.”

**VAHRAM** : Research trip... (Overcome with laughter.) Of course, back then we Armenians were overcome by a love of research. We scattered to all four corners of the world for this research project. I'm no researcher; I'm an actor! I get on stage and act. And he said five years! Oh, five years! They'll ask me what contribution I made to the literature of theatre! Is this the way you write the history of theatre?

**MUHSİN** : What should I have done? Should I have said Vahram only just managed to escape the massacre? Should I have said zealots attacked our film set and Vahram only just escaped with his life? Should I have written all that and be forced to flee, like you? What would have changed?

In the transition period from Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic, one of the major historical events that changed the face of the theatrical activity in Turkey is Armenian Genocide and succeeding exclusionist cultural politics of the political establishments (Güllü 2008, 21). Any historical account misleading the Catastrophe cannot come up with a coherent historical assessment. Without a doubt, Muhsin Ertuğrul was aware of the consequences of losing the biggest component of the İstanbul's theatre scene. In KVO, Muhsin defended himself on the grounds of his

inability to talk about the events because of the political paradigm. He chooses to stay silent and work for the betterment of Turkish theater. This scene offers a question about the artist's responsibility to the history that they are part of. Muhsin stayed silent, and his justification for that is to sustain theatrical activity in Turkey. On the other hand, the echo of his silence both hides the historical efforts of Armenian theatre practitioners and strengthens the current monoculturalism and denialist politics of the Republic, shrinking the overall freedom for artists to express themselves. It is one of the "to be or not to be" moments for Muhsin Ertuğrul in the play, in terms of whether it is good for him to stay with reproducing silences or to leave the stage to the "rats"?

Given Muhsin's attempt to silence the history, KVO does not atomize the whole tradition of denialism and silence on Muhsin Ertuğrul's shoulders and suggests reading his subject position in a broader context. In one of the scenes, Muhsin is caught by the new Republican regime's two officials on a train journey. One of them is a woman who represents the new regime's pro- enlightenment and pro-western vessel, who believes in the transformative power of art to sustain the ideals of democracy and secularism in Turkey. The other one is a man representing the militarist and ultra-nationalist wing. The scene is built like Hamlet's confrontation with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Parallely to Hamlet, these two officials try to convince Muhsin to turn back to Turkey; however, Muhsin resists, and uses the famous metaphor of "pipe" stating that they cannot play him like a pipe. However, the female official uses male official to threaten Muhsin with an evidence that documenting his acting in a German film *Die Frau Mit Den Millionen*<sup>5</sup> which mentions the Armenian Genocide. Muhsin finds himself in a "mousetrap" and accepts the deal with the encouragement of the female official.

This scene is imagined based on an anecdote in Vasfi Rıza Zobu's memoir. One day, a newspaper published an announcement saying that a Turkish actor is played in a German movie which talks about the Armenian Genocide. The next day, Muhsin Ertuğrul cancels his tour to Egypt and flees to Europe. Vasfi Rıza works for Muhsin Ertuğrul to not to be punished and gets into contact with his friends in the government. With Zobu's efforts, somehow, the deal is closed. Vasfi Rıza points out that nearly no one stood by Muhsin Ertuğrul and turned their backs to him immediately.

Zobu's anecdote provides strong observations on why Muhsin Ertuğrul's acts of si-

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<sup>5</sup>The film narrates a story of a genocide survivor woman. Muhsin Ertuğrul plays an Ottoman pasha in the film. Right after its release, the film was censored by German authorities. Film's producers were forced to change the name of the country in which massacre took place, from Ottoman Empire to Dağistan Republic: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0439184/>

lencing are dominant throughout his memoir. The political environment of Turkey at the time did not allow him to voice his genuine position towards Armenian Genocide, and dominant nationalist discourse retrieved him from composing an honest analysis on the beginnings of modern theatrical activity in Turkey by Armenians. There is a gap between his early writings and his later assessments on these issues. The key turn here dates the establishment of the new Republic. His writings in *Temaşa* magazine dated back to the late 1910s and early 1920s are generous to celebrate the Armenian theatre tradition in terms of its language and content. His commemoration of Mardiros Minakyan<sup>6</sup> after his death signals his sincere and enthusiastic approach compared to his calculative and timid language in the memoir when he is mentioning the Minakyan's theatre (Ertuğrul 1989, 130-132). The process which made him baptized as the father of Turkish theater and becoming the "state's artist" retrieved him from coming up with a critical and alternative narrative. Even though he provides his views and mentions the collaborations he had with Armenian theater practitioners in his memoir, he never attempts to fully distinguish its centrality in Turkey's theatre, silencing the constitutive element of their efforts. This calls to question the position of the artist in terms of its relationship with the political authorities.

Muhsin Ertuğrul, both as an artist and as a manager of İstanbul Şehir Tiyatroları [İstanbul Municipal Theaters] and later Devlet Tiyatroları [State Theaters] was always in a dangerous dance with the power structures. He sometimes stayed in line within the aimed direction, and sometimes he was a law unto himself. He is for sure an ambiguous figure who cannot be easily put into one box. Instead of proposing simple answers, KVO demystifies the cult of Muhsin Ertuğrul by introducing what he has silenced within his narrative of the history of Turkey's theater. His mythic figure as the founding father of the Turkish theater is shaken with the introduction of the silenced subjects and events in the history. In doing so, the need for a mythic figure is becoming apparent in the nationalist histories of Turkey. By approaching the Muhsin Ertuğrul cult from a critical distance, KVO shows the Muhsin Ertuğrul myth's functioning as a tool, which further silences the multi-ethnic legacy of Turkey's theater.

### 2.3 Silencing of the Armenian Representation in the Historical Accounts

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<sup>6</sup>To see Ertuğrul's commemoration of Mardiros Minakyan please visit: <http://www.mimesis-dergi.org/2015/01/muhsin-ertugrul-1/>

**MUHSİN** : When I started to act, there were no decent theatres around; no playwrights, no scene designers, no costume designers! And no audience! You know how it was. After rehearsing a play over and over again, you were grateful if you managed to perform it twice! A third performance was a miracle! While you were flaunting your stuff on stage in Soviet Russia, in Europe, in Armenia, I was here trying to establish a theatre! And from nothing, I should add! From nothing! [Sıfırdan!]  
*Vahram makes a gesture as if he had been stabbed in his back*

**VAHRAM** : Nothing? You're right, there was nothing... Nothing... If only they hadn't made it nothing then... [Sıfırlamasaydılar o zaman]

After the Armenian Genocide and the following repressive politics against non-Turkish communities, Armenian theatre practitioners eventually either left Turkey or stopped acting (Güllü 2008, 18). The ones who pursued acting were mostly forced to perform under Turkish stage or screen names (Bulut, 2017). When Muhsin came back to Turkey, he was feeling the frustration of the lack of qualified theatre practitioners that he can work with together to thrive the theatrical activity in Turkey. As I mentioned above, he never talks about the consequences of the Genocide and its catastrophic effect on the theatre scene in Turkey. In KVO, his complaints to Vahram about the current stage of theatre in İstanbul implicitly mention the aftereffects of Armenian Genocide. Vahram's answer to his complaints is the other side of the story. The Armenian theatre practitioners were forced to leave the stage and, in a way, the devoid of their existence opened the path for the creation of the Muhsin Ertuğrul myth. In the performance of this scene, Muhsin's words act as if they are knives and they stab Vahram from his back. This gestus intensifies the scene's meaning to show how Muhsin Ertuğrul's one-man myth conceals and reproduces the silences in the histories of Turkey's theater.

After this tense scene, Muhsin tries to soften Vahram, offers him a liquor, and the two start to talk about how it was not "nothing" and how colorful and vibrant was the theatre environment they experienced. The conversation includes Armenian theatre masters Hagop Vartovyan, Mardiros Minakyan, and Rosa Felekyan, a "wonderful Greek actress" Veroniye Hanım, Karagöz and Ortaoyunu performances, Comic Rıza, A Jewish playwright Lorya Bey's political play on Dreyfus case, and how the two

met in the play's production process, and the first play written in Kurdish. . . The construction of the scene is built as a "commemoration" of this rich past and it evokes nostalgic feelings for Muhsin. However, Vahram cuts this nostalgic commemoration and reminds him of the proposal of playing *Hamlet* and states that there is only one character he had not played in *Hamlet*, the ghost's part. However, Vahram already plays the ghost part in KVO. This meta-theatrical move, again, disturbs Muhsin's relaxed psyche. Muhsin moves away from his catharsis and he is being reminded of the silenced Armenian representation in the history writing.

In order to better understand the tradition that Muhsin Ertuğrul is part of, it is crucial to look at the historiographies of Turkey's theater in terms of how and when they introduced silences on the multicultural fabric of the Ottoman theater. I am not going to specifically consider every theatre historians' accounts because it is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will look at dominant trends and leanings that shape the historical narratives written in the Republican era that silences Armenian identity.

The young Turkish Republic has situated itself as a milestone and tried to cut its ties with the Ottoman past that shapes its current form (Güllü 2008, 12). The alphabet revolution, clothing reform and Central Asia based history and language theories were the major attempts to reshape the Turkish national consciousness and they were circulating in both academic and public circles widely (Adak, Altınay 2018, 194). One of the first initiations to create a historical document on the history of Turkey's theatre comes from Ahmet Fehim Efendi<sup>7</sup>, who is a famous theatre practitioner himself, by publishing his memoir called *Sahnedede 50 Yıl* [50 Years on the Stage]. Although he was in the center of the multi-ethnic theatrical environment in the late Ottoman period, he mostly talks about the Muslim theatre practitioners of the time in his memoir. This is a very significant sign that shows one of the first attempts of history writing in Turkey contains an eliminative approach from the very beginning. Firat Güllü interprets this overstress of Turkish and Muslim representations as following: "from the embryonic stage of the phenomenon called 'Turkish' theater... the multicultural project of Ottoman theatre is left to be analyzed through a monolithic lens" (Güllü 2008, 13).

The theatrical studies started from Ahmet Fehim Efendi and other historians' efforts up until the 1970s fall under the first generation of theater historians. The common trait of this generation of historians is they vastly used the historical documents

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<sup>7</sup>Ahmet Fehim Efendi (1856- 1930) is a famous Turkish theatre practitioner. He started theatre in Agop Vartovyan's company in Gedikpaşa and later collaborated with Mardiros Minakyan and other Armenian directors. He also directed two films and works as a teacher at Darülbedayi. His jubilee in 1926 was arranged by Muhsin Ertuğrul.

only produced in Turkish (13). One major exception to this trend is Refik Ahmet Sevengil who used certain documents in other languages in his book called *Türk Tiyatrosu Tarihi* [The History of Turkish Theater] published in 1968. However, his work is one of the central books that paved the way for the canonization of the term “Turkish Theater” by its exclusionary attitude against non- Turkish communities (15).

The historians who produced works between 1970 and 2000s are called second generation of historians of Turkey’s theater. This generation’s most influential figure is Metin And, who wrote numerous books, articles and columns on Turkey’s theater. His comprehensive study of the history of Turkey’s theater diverges from the earlier tradition with his usage of documents that are written in different languages such as Armenian, Greek, English, French, German, etc. His works are still accepted as the most comprehensive study of theater in Turkey. Even though he opened his work to alternative sources, he does not withdraw himself to follow this exclusionary agenda. Instead, he used these sources to richer his study for the sake of constructing the most comprehensive history of “Turkish theater” (18). The following two examples are very telling in terms of his overall nationalistic project. The first one is his reception of Hagop Vartovyan (Güllü Agop). Hagop Vartovyan is an Armenian director and manager who established the Vartovyan Company, staged plays both in Armenian and Turkish between 1867 to 1880. He is seen as the first initiator of establishing a national stage in Turkey. According to Şarasan, Turkish theater owes its foundations and development to him because until Vartovyan “nobody had ever tried to perform in Turkish or even thought about it” (Şarasan 2008, 20). Vartovyan converted to Islam and changed his name to Yakup in his forties. Even though the historical importance of his efforts to stage the first productions in Turkish is vital in terms of Turkey’s history writing, the discussions about his historical position are reduced to his conversion to Islam. Metin And commented on this issue as follows:

"Neither his contemporaries nor our contemporary historians show the necessary interest to Güllü Agop. . . the whole discussion is centered on his conversion to Islam and changing his name to Yakup. However, long before his conversion to Islam and renaming himself, he felt as a Turk, acted as a Turk and dedicated his life to the development of the Turkey’s theater and to the creation of a national stage" (And 1999, 261).

This example shows how the silencing of history operates as “retrospective significance”. Even though he wants to react against the unsatisfactory ways of elaborations on Vartovyan’s historical significance, he ends up introducing another one,

shifting the discussion from Muslimness, which was the main motor of Ottoman style nationalism to ethnocentric nationalist ideology of the Republican era as Turkishness. In his book *Vartovyan Kumpanyası ve Yeni Osmanlılar* Fırat Güllü further comments on Metin And's positioning of Hagop Vartovyan as an attempt of Turkification that indicates a barren logic that if and only if a historical figure to be counted as a part of the history of Turkey's theater, this figure must be a Turk: "since the 'Turkey's history belongs to the Turkish history' the history of Turkey's theater could only be investigated as Turkish Theater history" (Güllü 2008, 18). Through Metin And's comments on Hagop Vartovyan, silencing operates on the moment of making history. By proposing an alternative narration of retrospective significance; he creates another discourse of silencing, ignores Vartovyan's Armenianness and defines him as a Turk to make him acceptable to be a part of Turkish history.

The other example I will provide is his explanation of why he uses lots Armenian names in his books:

"It is a surprising thing for readers that why there are so many Armenian names in my book *Osmanlı Tiyatrosu* [Ottoman Theatre]. For our country, it is a well known fact that writing about Armenians carries certain difficulties. On the one hand, it is a community that we remember with the great values they created, with their contributions that can never be ignored in our culture and art history. But on the other, it is a name we use when expressing the origin of terrorist attacks that kill our statesmen: Armenians" (288).

This is a very powerful example of why Armenian identity continues to be silenced in Turkey's history writing. As it is brought up by Trouillot, history writing gives clues for the power relations dominating the present. Even though Metin And provides the historical representation of Armenian identity in his history books, he cannot help himself but presenting an excuse for the excessive representation, again in terms of numbers. It is reminiscent of the dual perception of the Armenian identity in Turkey: the "good" and "bad" Armenians. Armenians like Güllü Agop or the other culturally assimilated theater practitioners that worked in the Ottoman era are regarded as the "good" Armenians who helped Turks to develop a Turkish stage. Especially a figure like Güllü Agop, who And described as "felt and acted" as a "Turk", is a harmless representation for him to glorify in his history books. With this act, he silences Vartovyan's identity twice: first when choosing him to be represented as a Turkish figure based on his assimilationist assumptions, and second when he labeled



him as a “good” figure, dislocating him from his historical significance and using his image as a generalization which intensifies the ill logic of ethnocentric thinking and reproduce stereotypes. The “bad” Armenians for him are the ones who are not open to discipline so that they should be put out of the picture, silenced and criminalized in a terrorist image. This shows And’s hidden assimilationist and colonial thinking behind his works. This mentality provides us the motivation behind the cutting off of the Armenian identity in the one-sided historiographies of Turkey’s theater.

KVO offers a break with this reductionist representation of Armenian identity either as “good” or “bad” which led to a problematic regime of representation that creates further silences. Also, with Vahram’s intervention, KVO does not suggest any nostalgic attachment with the past that which, again, creates forms of silencing in different guises. By creating a confrontation between Vahram and Muhsin and by forcing Muhsin to reconsider his “accurate” memories, the stage turns into an alternative attempt for history writing of the Turkey’s theater and questions the previously drawn limits of the representations of Armenian identity in this history. The Hamlet’s central question of “to be or not to be” is not only explored in the sense of being represented in the history of Turkey’s theater or not; further, it calls for a careful regime of representation that is alert to the power of silencing and the inequalities it pertains to. Resonating the Hamlet’s famous soliloquy for the clown Yorick, Muhsin takes a skull in his hands and recalls the Armenian theatre practitioners’ efforts for sustaining a theatre environment in Turkey and starts an honest conversation with the past:

**MUHSİN** : It wasn't from nothing, of course... Wasn't it watching the plays of Minakyan as a child that got me excited about theatre? (The skull on the desk catches his eye. He goes to the desk and picks it up) ... Master! (refers to Minakyan) How ungrateful is this profession, and how cruel is time! Was it not he who toiled for years on shabby stages to arouse in the public a love of theatre? That body of his that now lay in the cold earth once warmed the hearts of theatregoers and moved them to tears. (refers to Vartovyan) Who knows what calculations were made in this small space in order to keep his theatre on its feet. How these teeth must have clenched while squabbling with capricious actors. Go; hide those plays away in that padlocked chest. Was that not your most treasured possession? Threaten your actors, "I'll take my chest and leave" ...But you had nowhere to go, did you? What a shame! That padlocked chest that you believed was the centre of the universe is of no use to you any longer. Those melodic lines; the quavering, melancholy voice of your favourite actress, Eliza; Kinar's fists pressed onto her chest... All these are in the distant past now. For better or for worse, you all left us a theatre... and you left.

#### 2.4 Silencing the Efforts of Women Theatre Practitioners

**MUHSİN** : Arusyak Hanım... I fell in love with her the first time I saw her perform. But was it the real Arusyak I was in love with, or her mirage on the stage?

One of the strange things about acting is the ontology of the very moment of action. Whether the person who is performing the action is the character or the person performing the character? Or something altogether different, a third being which is a mixture of the two? This issue captivated lots of theater practitioners and theatre theoreticians' attention, and theories on acting and performance still discuss the

performer's paradoxical existence on stage. In the case of Arusyak Hanım, who later will be exposed as Latife; this discussion becomes embodied in the fabric of the character, opening ways to think of performance in a general sense as one's performance of her own actions and the perception of this performance. When Muhsin sees Arusyak/Latife the ghost on the stage for the first time in the play, he remembers his sincere affection for her, but could not decide whether this affection is based on her real image or her appearance as the character. However, the thing he was not aware of is she was already performing the both, just in different ways. Latife lived in a world where Muslim women were not allowed to become a part of the public performance arena, and her escape was to start another performance, performing twice to get what she wanted. And the captivating point of this double performance is Latife disguises herself as an Armenian actress who is going to be liquidated from the stage in a short amount of time. Thus, Latife's performances could not escape from silencing in both ways.

In the former sections, I explained how silencing regulates the historical accounts on the repression of Armenian identity and how it paved the way for an ill representational logic. It is a well-known fact that this ethnocentric attitude dominating the historiographies on Turkey's theater goes hand in hand with paternalistic discourses. In these works, the women's participation to history is either ignored or silenced in a way that creates another representational regime which classifies actress subjects either as the "perfect" representation of a Turkish woman or unorthodox outsiders. KVO questions the validity of these inaccurate and deficient historiographies through taking one of the silenced figures at its center whose existence is discarded from these history books.

The inspiration for the Arusyak/ Latife Hanım is based on a very short writing published in *Darülbedayi* magazine called "Temaşamızda Türk Kadını" [Turkish Women in our Spectacle History]<sup>8</sup> in 1931 by M. Kemal Küçük.<sup>9</sup> The story of K. Hanım is told to Küçük by K. Hanım's actor friend Tokatlı Amca Hüseyin Efendi. According to Hüseyin Efendi's account, there was a Muslim woman called K. Hanım who wanted to get up on the stage. According to him, K. Hanım's motivation to perform in theatrical plays was not based on a passionate love for theater, but "a romantic love adventure, diametrically opposed to the mentality of that time" and a "coincidence" (Kemal 1931,12). She acted in a few plays including Namık Kemal's

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<sup>8</sup>M. Kemal justly insists on the usage of the term "Temaşa" rather than theatre because of the wideness of the term bears. I find the word "Spectacle" as the most convenient translation of this term.

<sup>9</sup>In the original text, he did not use his surname in signing this piece. He wrote his full name as "M. Kemal".

Zavallı Çocuk and danced and sang in canto performances. She first got on the stage in Nazilli in 1889 under the pseudonym Amelya and she was introduced to the audience as a Greek actress. She immediately took the public's attention for her perfect pronunciation of Turkish.<sup>10</sup> However, suspicions against her ethnic identity were growing because she accidentally let expressions like "Fessupanallah" or "la havle vela kuvvete" slipped out of her mouth. One day, the governor of the province of Ankara Abidin Paşa's daughter Nefise Hanım encountered K. Hanım at a Hamam spared only for Muslim women. She pressured her to confess the truth and K. Hanım revealed her secret. After that, Abidin Paşa glossed over this issue and K. Hanım stopped acting for sure and fled from the city with her husband (13). Although she never historically mentioned as the first Muslim woman got on the stage, this issue attracted Metin And's attention (he is the only person who talks about this topic among other historians) and he asserted that K. Hanım's name was Kadriye, and she moved in Ankara with her husband after this incident (And 144).

KVO critically re-imagines Kadriye Hanım's untold story by playing with the patriarchal categorizations of women in the historiographies of Turkey's theater. The first time Arusyak/ Latife gets into contact with Muhsin is when she comes to "serve" Muhsin and Vahram Turkish coffees. This recalls the inherent positioning of women in the histories of Turkey's theatre, as if she is invited by Muhsin to serve these two famous men's discussion as a side example. This also echoes the notions around Ophelia's perception as a servant to underline Hamlet's centrality better.

For Voltaire, Ophelia was "Hamlet's mistress", for Samuel Johnson "the young, the beautiful, the harmless and the pious". Lacan's interpretation summarizes the early and dominant accounts: "she is linked forever, for centuries to the figure of Hamlet"; however, his version is mostly the retelling of the same story from a psychoanalytic point of view: "the object of Ophelia is Hamlet's object of male desire" (Showalter, 76). In short, even though Ophelia is vastly explored by Shakespearean critical tradition, she always explained through Hamlet, either as his love object or as his "other" (Showalter, 77).

In a play in which everybody tries to dig a pit for somebody else and surveils the others (Eagleton 146); Ophelia functions as an "innocent" young lady who is used

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<sup>10</sup>The correct pronunciation of Turkish was a very debated issue at the time. Since only Armenian actresses are allowed to act, their pronunciation of Turkish were mostly mocked by the general public and journalists. This became a very important issue especially for Armenian actresses since the Armenian theatre practitioners were the main group producing plays in Turkish. There was a competition among Armenian actresses to deliver Turkish in the most correct way. For example, Eliza Binemeciyan took private lessons on Turkish and Turkish literature from Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil. One of the signature elements of her acting was accepted and clapped for her perfect pronunciation of Turkish.

first as his father Polonius and new king Claudius' tool to make Hamlet speak his mind. She believes that this will be good for the young prince to relieve. In reaction to that, she is used by Hamlet to express his uncontrollable madness through his violent acts against her, in accordance with his plan. After losing his father and Hamlet's departure, she loses her mind. As opposed to Hamlet, who championed the number of soliloquies in all of the Shakespeare's plays, she does not have a single soliloquy. Instead, she sings and speaks in a very scattered manner, which her speech is listened to but not understood by other characters. Her words "...That carry but half sense. Her speech is nothing" (4.5.161). Ophelia's speech is silenced through the label of mad.

In KVO, this theme of the silence/ incomprehensibility of Ophelia finds its counterpart as the ghostly Ophelia of the play, Arusyak/ Latife Hanım. Her wish is to rebel against this regime of representation imposed on herself through calling Muhsin to explain why he does not choose her to play Ophelia in the Darülbedayi production after the establishment of the Republic. She questions Muhsin about why he had not chosen her in the first place:

- LATİFE** : I wasn't a suitable candidate for you anyway. . .
- MUHSİN** : That's not true, why wouldn't you be suitable?
- LATİFE** : I wasn't. But if, for example, I had had a husband who gave me permission to appear on stage; if I had been the woman of a household, the mother of children. . .
- MUHSİN** : Yes, that would have made things easier.
- LATİFE** : Mushin, you weren't looking for an actress back then.
- MUHSİN** : Don't be ridiculous. Of course we were looking for an actress.
- LATİFE** : No, you were looking for a role model for our young ladies.

Muhsin Ertuğrul was critical about the Muslim women's ban from the stage from the very beginning of his acting career. One of his early writings in 1918 in *Temaşa* magazine sums up his position on this issue: "Because of the absence of women, we do not have a theatre and for the same reason we do not have theatre plays" (Ertuğrul 1993, 161). After the apparent rise of the nationalistic discourses, appearance of the Turkish women on stage becomes a more central question among Turkish intelligentsia. Even though there are lots of Armenian actresses still acting

in İstanbul, they are discarded as “broken Turkish accents”, and the need to hear perfect Turkish from a woman’s mouth is accepted as one of the great signs of having a fully Turkish theatre (Skylstad 2010, 61). In the same article, Ertuğrul addresses Turkish women to show courage and act side by side with him on the stage.

A year later, Ertuğrul’s dream was realized. As accepted by official histories, Afife Jale first stepped up on stage in Hüseyin Suat’s play *Yamalar* [Patches] in April 1919 under the stage name Jale at the Apollon Theatre in Kadıköy. Even though the audience accepted for that day was all women, Afife Jale’s courageous act caused many negative reactions, and police went after to chase her. She managed to escape a few times; however, later she was forced to stop acting. According to Fahriye Dinçer, Darülbedayi was not institutionalized at the time, so they did not have any political power to protest the official judgment (Dinçer 2017, 90).

After that, Afife Jale was discarded from the stage until the establishment of the Turkish Republic. However, she was not called back to Darülbedayi even after the Republic’s establishment. The former police investigation on her was accepted as a threat to her perception by the audience. Also, her lifestyle was not approved for the new regime’s ideals. She was married but divorced, and she did not have any children. Because of her exclusion from the theatrical circles, she experienced a major depression. Afife’s doctor prescribed her morphine, which later led to the level of addiction (93). Thus, until the 1980s, Afife Jale was totally discarded from the histories of Turkey’s theater. Both her social exclusion and her abjection from the nationalist history books shows the limits of the Republic’s ideal women image to be recorded in history. As opposed to Afife Jale, the young Republic’s ideal actress prototype was encouraged to be realized in Bedia Muvahhit. She first acted on stage in 1923 with the encouragement of M. Kemal Atatürk. And later she appeared as a national heroine in Muhsin Ertuğrul’s film adaptation of Halide Edip Adıvar’s novel *Ateşten Gömlek* [The Shirt of Flame].<sup>11</sup> The film is commercialized as “the magnificent Turkish film, shot on Turkish land with Turkish money, Turkish intention and the work of Turks” (İnanoğlu 2004, 24).

Contrary to Afife, who died in a mental asylum because of her morphine addiction, she enjoyed a career of more than fifty years and was praised as Republican artist and an embodiment of a modern Turkish woman (Skylstad 2010, 83). However, in her real life, she felt the need to continuously prove herself to be the good, ideal Turkish woman. Skylstad suggests that Bedia Muhavvit was used as a “tabula rasa” among the Turkish nationalist writers and historians. Her work and acting

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<sup>11</sup>Bedia Muhevvit states that Halide Edip specifically wanted her characters to be performed by Turkish women, not by Armenian actresses (Skylstad 2010, 72).

were never critically examined. She is reduced to the role of a perfect representation of a modern Turkish woman, a domesticated artist, married with children in a decent lifestyle (94).

Already suggested by the similarity between the two names, Latife reminds the name of the first Turkish woman who got on the stage as officially accepted, Afife. In KVO, the story of Kadriye Hanım and Afife Jale are parallelly used in Latife's story. One of them is totally erased from history and the other is abjected as the "other" woman among her contemporaries, and Muhsin Ertuğrul was one of them. In the play, when Muhsin first learns that Arusyak Hanım was actually a Muslim woman, he cheers her as "revolution" and a "heroine", echoing Muhsin Ertuğrul's amazement after Afife Jale's first performance. However, after the Republic's establishment nobody stood by Afife Jale, which eventually led to her tragic death. On the other hand, Bedia Muhavvit's representation is reduced to a good wife and a mother prototype to set up a role model for future generations of actresses. It is very strange that even though Mühevvit also divorced and raised her child as a single mother, this issue was never brought up by historians while Afife's tragic story comes around all the time. Silencing here operates in two ways: One is totally excluding the materials that are talking about certain woman, like Kadriye Hanım. And the other is to categorize women's efforts as perfect representations, role models, symbols of a modern Turkish women like Bedia Muhavvit and marginalizing the ones who do not stand in the same line with the dominant ideology, like Afife Jale.

In one of the flashback scenes, Latife visits Muhsin in Darülbedayi and tells him that his husband is passed, so she can turn back to acting. Muhsin gets excited by the news and arranges an audition for the Ophelia part that he is about to start rehearsing in his new *Hamlet* production. Since Latife could not perform in 1911 production, this would be her second chance to play this part. The scene they rehearse is the scene in which Hamlet meets with Ophelia to deny giving her love letters which is followed by the famous "Get thee to a nunnery" part. In this scene, Muhsin is also watched by a government official, and he gets angry with his participation to the rehearsals. Also, a figure like Latife is a thread for their funding since she already has blacklisted and she is a "widow", who should be mourning for his dead husband rather than going on a stage. Throughout this scene, Muhsin aggressively plays Hamlet's already hostile lines, and cries specifically at "Get thee to a nunnery" line. Recalling *Hamlet*, the nunnery may indicate either going to a "monastery" or "brothel". In KVO's universe, it is transformed to two distinct options proposed for actresses: she either chooses to be in line with the given order for women to perform on stages, meaning the necessity of being a good wife and a mother along with professional acting to be a modern role model or simply, she is

not allowed to perform. Muhsin cuts the audition in the middle and Latife cannot take the part, again. In later scenes, Latife pressures Muhsin for being silent on the discriminative attitude against “certain” woman, and for not choosing her as Ophelia in *Darülbedayi* production. After a long discussion, Muhsin confesses his genuine position to this issue:

**MUHSİN** : Yes, Latife Hanım, on such issues I kept silent. But in some ways that was how I became Ertuğrul Muhsin. And had I not become Ertuğrul Muhsin, I wouldn't have been able to protect those dozens of young actors when they were in trouble, I wouldn't have been able to open dozens of theatres and introduce thousands to the world of theatre. And do you think you were the only victim?

For him, Latife Hanım is only one of the unfortunates just like the non- Turkish actors who are forced to leave the İstanbul's stages. Muhsin misses the specificity of gender relations operating the silencing and censorship mechanisms and tries to justify his acts on the grounds of his greater duties. Muhsin defended himself by using a discourse carrying a hidden claim of superiority over Latife. This shows how the gender relations were operating in the theatrical institutions which Muhsin was at the center. These institutions abjected some women as others and obliged them to leave the stage. Muhsin's self- defense can be read as a criticism of Kemalist ideologues that discursively accepts the gender equality; however, in practice, they lack the capacity to create an equal space of representation and work environment.

## 2.5 The Ghosts' Claim

“My dear Muhsin, I haven't received a word from you in quite a long time and I didn't have the chance to write to you. I hope this letter will reach you well. I would like to go on stage in Istanbul or Ankara. While we still have time, I would like you to help me with this. So, I ask of you: please write an invitation and send a copy to Moscow and the original to me, so that I can keep track of everything here. Sayad will tell you the address that you will send to. I'm still capable of playing any character you see fit for me, in Turkish or any other language. Always your friend



and brother, Vahram Papazyan. Erivan, 1964.”

This is the letter Vahram Papazyan sent to Muhsin Ertuğrul in 1964.<sup>12</sup> We do not know whether or not Muhsin Ertuğrul received the letter. He does not mention this letter in his memoir or any other writings, and we may never achieve a satisfying answer to this question. I think, the crucial point here is not speculating about whether he really got the letter or not; it is the historical significance of this proposal as an attempt for dialogue is what still remains. Let me turn to my initial question, do these three manage to play *Hamlet* for the last time, through this performance? Does Vahram Papazyan’s wish to step up on stage in Turkey again, or as translated in the KVO’s structure, the representation of the multi-ethnic past in the history of Turkey’s theater sustained? I argue that KVO is an attempt from the theatre stage to participate in this history making process from an alternative point of view, without overshooting the present power relations operating the ways in which we make sense of history. This is why the question of this letter’s consequence opens a way for a confrontation between the three constitutive figures of the history of theater in Turkey. KVO’s strategy for this entails narrating the past through archive and historical documents, but also moving beyond them by playing/ re-imagining them in the attempt to re-configure the past to come up with an alternative narrative.

As Trouillot points out, history is not only produced in the history books and academic circles: “Next to professional historians we discover artisans of different kinds, unpaid or unrecognized field laborers who augment, deflect, or reorganize the work of the professionals as politicians, students, fiction writers, filmmakers, and participating members of the public” (Trouillot 2015, 48-49). Since the production of history does not only entail historians, the echo of silencing and the protests against those silences can also be produced in a variety of different ways through different mediums. And the art of theatre is one of the mediums to articulate the silencing mechanisms, and silenced subjects and events that show the power relations operating in history writing.

French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s observations on the limits and possibilities of what an artwork can bring to destabilize the dominant narratives of any kind is a useful theoretical outlook to further the discussion here. Rancière observes a crucial potential in the artworks because of the artwork’s ability to create dissensus within a given consensual politics of domination and subjugation. Rancière asserts that art has a potential to create disharmony in the society by weaving an alternative

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<sup>12</sup>Original copy of this letter is written in French. This Letter is exhibited in the museum of Art and Literature in Yerevan: <http://www.agos.com.tr/tr/yazi/7172/memleketinden-surgun-bir-othello-vahram-papazyan>

*sensory fabric*. He defines sensory fabric as “a certain *distribution of the sensible*<sup>13</sup>, which defines their [people’s] way of being together” (Rancière, 2009, 56). For an artwork to stitch an alternative sensory fabric is only possible by causing dissensus within the given relations of dominance and subjugation. For Rancière, dissensus means “a conflict between two regimes of sense, sensory worlds” (57). Dissensus is a disagreement about “who speaks and who does not speak, what has to be heard as a voice of pain, and what has to be heard as an argument on justice” (Rancière, 2010, 2). Thus, dissensus appears as an activity that traces and exhibits the inherent inequalities in a regime of representation. And by traversing different forms of identities, and hierarchies between discourses; dissensus presents new subject positions and “heterogeneous objects” to the sensory fabric of a society (Corcoran 2010, 2). In that sense, dissensus has the potential to generate a representational crisis that puts a certain regime of meaning into trouble. Thus, thinking dissensus with silencing, once the mechanism behind silencing is made visible, then the ones whose “speech is nothing” becomes audible and those rejected from history enacts to share their “different” sensory worlds to the sensory fabric. By that, there appears a potential of a new dramaturgy on what is sensible and intelligible. Hence, an artwork helps to bring fresh possibilities of constructing a new regime of representation, which may contain an emancipatory effect on the subjects and common objects of history.

By creating dissensus and discontinuities in the narratives of Turkey’s history of theatre, KVO manages to rouse a new sensory paradigm that causes redistribution of the sensible to engage with the history by exposing the mechanisms of silencing and censorship inherent in these historiographies. It creates dissensus with the popular engagement with Muhsin Ertuğrul myth and undermines his role as the “founding father” and creates a powerful distortion in this myth making. However, this critical outlook does not treat Ertuğrul as if he was in a vacuum, rather its critique is directed to a general paradigm of history writing in Turkey, and Muhsin Ertuğrul myth is elaborated as a single side of a greater project. By this way, the defining mentality of “exclusion” dominating the accounts on histories of Turkey’s theater is not reproduced by implementing the same logic onto Muhsin Ertuğrul figure, so that the stage is secured from a problematic and crude “inquisition”. KVO embraces Muhsin Ertuğrul’s ambiguous position within its complexity and approaches his legacy from a critical point of view.

KVO also frees itself from the ill representational regime of portraying Armenian identity by critiquing the assimilationist and exclusionary agendas operating the

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<sup>13</sup>Rancière’s definition of the term *distribution of the sensible*: “I call ‘distribution of the sensible’ a generally implicit law that defines the forms of partaking by first defining the modes of perception in which they are inscribed.” (Rancière 2010, 36).

relations between the two ethnicities for over years. KVO shows how the ethnocentric and assimilationist elements were essential and integral part of the mentality behind these historiographies of Turkey's theatre. It offers to question the validity of the denialist historical accounts in terms of the inefficacy of their attempt to analyze the transition period from Ottoman Empire to the Turkish State. KVO's alternative approach creates dissensus in the present sensory fabric of the society in terms of both against the denialist history writing and the negative Armenian representations by putting the ethnocentric discourses into crisis. KVO offers cultural pluralist premises to analyze this era by reminding the multi-ethnic structure of the Ottoman stage and giving equal representational opportunities to its characters. Also, the usage of Armenian language in the play's text along with other languages strengthens the former claim and evokes the languages spoken in the plays staged in the Ottoman times. However, KVO does not romanticize this era as different ethnicities of the Empire were living in harmony; rather, directs its attention to the hidden inequalities of the Ottoman multicultural society, and nostalgic attachment with the past is problematized through its idiosyncratic silencing effect in the present.

In terms of the evaluations of the gender representations, KVO maintains a critical position to the paternalistic discourses evident in the narrations of the historical accounts. The silenced subjects and events in the history writing are unearthed without reproducing narratives of victimhood or martyrdom. Through the story of Kadriye Hanım, a case where neither archival research nor critical attention was substantial, KVO does not refuse to re-imagine what has been silenced through a particular critical lens. This act of imagination itself is an attempt of redistribution of the sensible as an intervention to the current politics of silencing and also channels the attention to discover the gender relations behind silencings. By that, the same gender relations operating in the historiographies in the Turkey's theater is unraveled.

In the final scene of the play, Muhsin accepts ghosts' wish to play *Hamlet* for the last time; however, the sun is coming up and ghosts need to go back. Ghosts exit the stage, and they tell Muhsin to remember them. In a way, KVO itself pours out from an initiation to remember them. After ghosts exit, Muhsin is alone again in his room, and a new production idea of *Hamlet* emerges in his mind. He wants to stage *Hamlet* one more time and he gives the details of the production in his final tirade:

**MUHSİN** : It's going to be a wonderful play... We will use the fortress of Rumelihisarı for the walls of Elsinore Castle. Hamlet will meet with his father's ghost on the fortress walls. There was a winch system I saw in Germany... We'll bring it to Turkey and use it to make the Ghost fly through the sky. Everyone will watch in amazement. We will draw a comparison between Hamlet and the Turkish intellectual. The play will start with the words, "Something is rotten in this state". Something is rotten in this state! Something is rotten in this state! We will clean up Rumelihisarı and build a stage to international standards. Later they can build a mosque there if they choose, or a synagogue or a church, but for now it will be used as a shrine to the theatre...

The production referred in the above speech is the production that Muhsin Ertuğrul staged in the Rumeli Hisarı in 1961 (Başak 28). Muhsin's final tirade refers both to a historical production made in 1961 and also to KVO itself. This ambivalent meta-theatrical effect is very telling in terms of how the play evokes dissensus in the current sensory paradigm. It again intervenes a historical event to distort the current regime of remembering and history writing practices in Turkey. By tying Vahram and Arusyak/ Latife's silenced representations in the history of Turkey's theatre to the current regime of memory making/ annihilation process under the AKP government through building a masjid to the Rumeli Hisarı fortress<sup>14</sup>, it shows how the present ideologies shaping the forms of history writing and remembering practices create silences on bodies, events and also spaces. The dissentive effect here is produced through juxtaposing the similar impacts of the current processes of memory annihilation process in contemporary Turkey with the early Republic's attempts of erasing the multi-ethnic character of theatre making in the late Ottoman era.

KVO disassociates itself from this current politics and offers a break, which can offer to maintain different elaborations of the past. By creating dissensus in the current regime of representation, KVO confers the possibility for an alternative history writing that can invite the silenced figures of the history of Turkey's theater back to historical narrative by underlying the different power usurpations occurred and still happening in the fabric of the society. Therefore, KVO calls to reconsider

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<sup>14</sup>In 2015, a masjid is built on the performance arena of the fortress of Rumeli Hisarı. It has created a huge discussion on the AKP's conservative politics to damage the artistic efforts in Turkey: <http://www.diken.com.tr/istanbulun-en-onemli-eksigi-gideriliyor-rumeli-hisarina-mescit/>

the former attempts of historical accounts narrating this transition period and opens future possibilities to write the history of Turkey's theater through a new lense.



### 3. THE UNMOURNED LOSSES OF MUHSİN AND HAMLET

Pity me not, but lend thy serious hearing, To what I shall unfold  
(1.5.5-6).

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KVO is an artistic attempt to answer the silenced letter that Vahram Papazyan sent to Muhsin Ertuğrul in 1964. It was sure an invitation for dialogue, but it was missed. In the universe of KVO, this forgotten initiation is revived and evokes a confrontation between these two historical figures by the ghosts' offer to stage *Hamlet*. As I described in the first chapter, the construction of the prologue suggests Muhsin may have fallen asleep before the entrance of the ghosts while he was writing his memories, and the whole performance can be read as Muhsin's dreaming or fantasy built around the letter and the ghosts. The ghosts' visit to Muhsin to propose a challenging bargain that is to perform *Hamlet* one more time forces Muhsin to recall the suppressed past events and people that he escapes with open eyes. Thinking KVO as Muhsin's dream reinforces the significance of the ghosts as repressed figures that haunt Muhsin. It underlines his unconscious intention to turn back to the letter and reconsider his relationship with the letter and ghost figures that his awake reason could not make sense. I think it is important to ask one more time here the question of why ghosts suggest no other play but *Hamlet*? Or why *Hamlet* haunts Muhsin's psyche?

Muhsin Ertuğrul and Vahram Papazyan staged *Hamlet* in 1911 in İstanbul for the first time together, so *Hamlet* has a historical significance for both of them. Also, given the devotion of Muhsin Ertuğrul to the play, *Hamlet* is an obvious trick for ghosts to make the deal more acceptable for Muhsin. As I pointed out in the first chapter, Muhsin Ertuğrul does not situate his fondness to *Hamlet* as a simple admiration, he has an almost obsessive attachment with the play.

As a chief figure in early republican theatre and cinema, Ertuğrul perceived a "magical" attachment between himself and Shakespeare's works: "I think there is a magical connection between my professional career and Shakespeare's plays in Turkey"

(Ertuğrul 1993,123). After staging *Hamlet* in 1911 with Vahram Papazyan, he went to Paris to study theatre, and there he saw a seventy three years old Mounet-Sully's performance of Hamlet, and admired the excellence of his performance. He writes: "I walk the streets enjoying this happiness that I have secured. An hour, an hour and a half, Hamlet's voice still in my ears ... I'm bringing Hamlet to the hotel. Not merely to the hotel but also into my bed" (Ertuğrul 1989, 149). He sleeps side by side with the translation of *Hamlet* and paints his face as the lead actor of the play and starts to act his own Hamlet (150). After that, he attends Aurelien Lugne -Poe's rehearsals with Suzanne Desprès' Hamlet and saw various other performances of the play by Alexander Moissi in Berlin, Raoul Aslan in Vienna, Michael Chekhov's Hamlet in Moscow Art theatre, and innumerable performances through Europe, Soviet Russia and America includes both professional and amateur theatres ranging from avant-gardes to classicists (Ertuğrul 1993, 128). When he returned to Turkey in 1927 as a director of the Darülbedayi, he staged *Hamlet* as the first two productions of that year, along with Strindberg's *The Father* (Başak 1969, 16). Based on a translation of Cevdet Bey and a performance text he discovered in Germany, he staged *Hamlet* and performed the title role. He was criticized by Islamists for his "Westernism" in both translation and performance of the play; however, Ertuğrul responded to the critics by advocating the humanist discourse in Shakespeare's plays, and defended *Hamlet's* circulation among Turks (Arslan 2008, 160). Later in his career, he staged the play five more times and asked for various translations of the play from different translators in order to achieve the "purist" Turkish. Among those translators are Halide Edip Adivar and Vahip Duran (1941), Orhan Burian (1944), and Sabahattin Eyüboğlu (1965). He claimed that he staged *Hamlet* in the line of secularist and Kemalist dramaturgies and links Shakespeare to universalist humanism, as a milestone which will introduce the deepest parts of the human soul to the Turkish audience. He cannot fully comprehend Shakespeare's ability to revive so many characters coming from very diverse backgrounds and rhetorically asks: "What am I if Shakespeare is human? What is Shakespeare if I am human?" (128).

It is possible to bring certain explanations to his admiration such as his view of Shakespeare and especially *Hamlet* as building blocks of modern civilizations (Ertuğrul, 1989 127-28), together with *Hamlet's* capacity to educate the public's moral and aesthetic senses in line with western ideals (130-31). However, I argue that KVO challenges this romanticized reception of Shakespeare and *Hamlet* as an ideal in itself for Muhsin Ertuğrul and reconstructs it as a melancholic attachment to the lost tradition of Armenian theatre practitioners and his friend Vahram's involuntary departure after the Armenian Genocide and the following exclusionist politics against non- Muslim and non- Turkish communities residing in Turkey. When we

reconsider this obsessive attachment to *Hamlet* within the fabric of KVO, these associations suggest a possibility to interpret the return to *Hamlet* again and again as a traumatic revisiting for Muhsin. To enlighten my point, it is necessary to explain how KVO interconnects its structure with *Hamlet*, and what kind of a Hamletic figure Muhsin is.

Very early in the play, when Vahram proposes Muhsin to play *Hamlet*, he cannot help himself but speaks about his ambiguous admiration to *Hamlet* and Shakespeare as something he does not also seem to perfectly understand:

**MUHSIN** : Hamlet... You know, it's as though there's a magical connection between my career and Shakespeare's plays... Whenever I run into difficulties, whenever I want to do something new, I always stage Hamlet.

In its most general sense, *Hamlet* is a revenge tragedy that narrates the story of the prince Hamlet, who is entitled to take vengeance of his murdered father King Hamlet by killing his uncle Claudius. Hamlet is justly praised for its intellectual competence for bringing rich and diverse ideas about human nature, the meaning of existence, life and death, and a lot more subjects that his inquiring mind deals with. However, his speech is deep, eloquent and sharp; he is in the middle of a mourning after his father's unforeseen death, and behind his radiant words, there is a tremendous experience of suffering and loss. According to Arthur Kirsch, if the vengeance structures the plot of the play, then "grief composes its essential emotional content, its substance" (Kirsch 1981, 17). Even before the Ghost's illumination of his murder and call to take revenge, he suffers deeply for his father's passing. Further, he was not receiving enough sympathy, especially for his mourning; rather, he is accused for not acknowledging the essential principle of liveliness that all alive beings, one day, must die. Gertrude emphasizes the "communality" of death to console his son:

**HAMLET** : Ay, madam, it is common.

**GERTRUDE** : If it be, Why seems it so particular with thee?

**HAMLET** : Seems, madam! nay it is; I know not "seems."

Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,  
Nor customary suits of solemn black,  
or windy suspiration of forced breath,  
No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,  
Nor the dejected havior of the visage,



Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,  
That can denote me truly. (1.2.74-86)

In this protesting speech to the court, he accepts the communality of grief; but its communality does not make it easily locatable and manageable. He tries to describe what is not fully apprehensible, expressible, and its consequence displaces familiar notions, feelings, and attachments to his life.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud defines mourning as “the reaction to the loss of a loved person, or to the loss of some abstraction which has taken the place of one, such as one’s country, liberty, an ideal, and so on.” (Freud 1917, 243). According to Freud, mourning is a psychic process that takes place when one loses a love object. Through mourning, the libidinal investment to the love object is withdrawn from the lost object. However, this withdrawal cannot be achieved at once. Rather, the libidinal detachment from the love object happens slowly through reality testing, which enables detachment from “each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to” by acknowledging the reality of losing that object. Eventually, the mourner is able to accept that the lost object is gone and moves on to invest his libidinal energy in new objects (244-45). Thinking in terms with the Freudian analysis, Hamlet experiences the work of mourning, a struggle between the instinctive human characteristic to stay libidinally attached to his dead father and the necessity to accept the apparent reality of his loss. Right after his quarrel with Gertrude, Claudius intervenes to Hamlet’s answer and voices another account on the naturalness of losing a father: “But you must know your father lost a father/ That father lost, lost his” (1.2.89.90), and situates Hamlet’s grief as an “unmanly” grief to warn him about damaging his masculine image with this prolonged mourning and distancing himself from the aforementioned line of “fathers” that he should also one day be. Claudius’ seemingly supportive and, I must add, sexist speech is another form of not showing genuine interest and care to his process of mourning. Hamlet cannot receive enough sympathy from both his mother and uncle. However, the strongest breakage to his mourning process comes not from them, but his dead father.

Soon, Horatio comes to give news to Hamlet that his father’s ghost is haunting the castle of Elsinore. Hamlet runs into the walls of the castle, and the ghost shows himself to him. Ghost wants to speak Hamlet alone to reveal his secret:

**GHOST** : ... List, list, O, list!  
if thou didst ever thy dear father love-

**HAMLET** : O, God!  
**GHOST** : Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.  
(1.5.22-25)

Hamlet learns that his uncle murdered his father by poisoning him and deceived his mother to wed him. Hamlet rages against this act of fratricide; and the shock of the murder of his father and the new marriage of his mother gradually fuels him with distemper.

**GHOST** : Fare thee well at once!  
The glow-worm shows the matin to be near,  
And 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire.  
Adieu, adieu, adieu. Remember me. (1.5.88-91)

The ghost's decree to remember him, while building the essential conflict for the purpose of revenge, never permits Hamlet to break free from this fratricide, intensifies his mourning, and drives him to what Freud calls melancholic attachment. The essential feature of the work of mourning, that is the ego's healing itself by cutting the libidinal ties with the lost object bit by bit, is precisely forbidden for him. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud differentiates mourning from melancholy (or what is now commonly called depression) as ego's enduring attachment to the lost object: The inability to dis-attach ego from the lost object because of the intensified grief and ambiguous relationship that the ego had with it. In melancholy, Freud writes "one cannot see clearly what is it that had been lost" in the sense that he knows what is actually lost but not aware "what he has lost in him" (245). The unconscious process of grief complicates the distinction between external and internal world which implies a specific emptiness to the ego: "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (246). Freud observes certain characteristics of melancholic persons: self-reproaches, self-reviling, self-accusation and "delusional expectation of punishment". This attack on the self is one of the distinguishing features of melancholia from mourning. These self-accusations associated with melancholia can be regarded as melancholic person's identification with the love object: "the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from it on to the patient's own ego" (Freud 248). Whatever ambiguous conflicts and emotions you have with the lost object are internalized within the ego, creating a split between the internalized love object and the emotions that the ego addresses at it. This internal splitting causes one critical, accusing subject and a guilty object within the ego while struggling for detachment from the love object. Freud writes "the shadow of the object fell upon

the ego, and the latter [lost object] could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object” (249). In this specific way, the object-loss is transferred as ego-loss, and this process leads to identification of the ego with the lost object.

Ghost’s dictum “remember me” withdraws Hamlet from abandoning the dead father behind. Ghost seems to sympathize with Hamlet’s grieving; however, by giving him the murderous purpose, he suffices the grounds for Hamlet to identify with Ghost’s anger and channels this anger into his ego. Hamlet internalizes this anger and distrust with desire to murder Claudius and stop the incestuous marriage of his mother:

**HAMLET** : Ay, thou poor ghost, whiles memory holds a seat  
In this distracted globe. Remember thee!  
Yea, from the table of my memory  
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records,  
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,  
That youth and observation copied there,  
And thy commandment all alone shall live  
Within the book and volume of my brain, (1.5.96-103)

Hamlet gives promise to detach himself from all the libidinal ties of the external reality which makes life desirable for him, “all trivial fond records/ All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,” and concentrate on his father’s revenge out of an internalized anger against his mother and uncle. The shadow of the ghost’s desire falls upon him, causing a split within his ego, and it pertains to his famous “duality” of the nature of his thoughts; mirroring the struggle within his mind to take his revenge or not. Following from this Freudian analysis, it is possible to suggest that Hamlet’s delay to take revenge could be understood with his melancholic attachment to the love object. To take revenge means, in a way, to end this melancholic attachment; however, Hamlet postpones this since the struggle between the lost object is already projected in his ego, and he stubbornly resists giving up on the lost object.

Metaphorically speaking, since the accepting the death of the father requires the cutting the libidinal ties with the lost object; in Hamlet’s case, breaking free from these libidinal attachments in a way suggests disengagement not only with the lost object but also from the internalized part of his ego, a kind of “suicide” or “death” of Hamlet himself too. At the end of the play, when Hamlet finally kills Claudius and takes his revenge, he also dies within a minute by the poisoned sword of Laertes. This indicates how the strong bonds with the lost object’s demise followed by his own

demise. “The rest is silence” Hamlet finally proclaims, as if he consciously makes sense of there is nothing left within his ego to struggle further since the revenge itself removed all the ties with the lost object.

Now, I want to turn to KVO and consider Muhsin’s position as a Hamletic figure. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost’s wish to take revenge is articulated by Vahram as staging *Hamlet* one more time as they did in 1911, reminding Muhsin both his unanswered letter, and also the forgotten tradition of Armenian theatre practitioners in the Ottoman era. In KVO, revenge operates both in the personal realm (as Vahram’s being a close friend of Muhsin) and the collective (the tradition that Vahram and Muhsin were part of). Thus, taking revenge for Muhsin means to “remember” what has been forgotten and the new *Hamlet* production will be its concrete completion just as Hamlet’s murder of Claudius. But what does it mean for Muhsin to take his revenge? What does his remembering entail?

As I mentioned in the first chapter, the Armenian Genocide and its consequences changed the face of theatre scene from top to bottom in Turkey. The void left by the deported and excluded theatre practitioners could not be replaced. Armenian Genocide never openly mentioned in the play; however, its effects always felt whenever the Armenian theatre practitioners’ absence is mentioned. KVO implicitly carries the violence of the Armenian genocide from its beginning to end. The constant questioning of where the Armenian theatre practitioners are signifies a broader question of where these Armenians are who left churches, palaces, buildings, graveyards, and theaters behind them. Thus, for Muhsin to remember all the past events and people would mean to be going against the denialist politics of Turkish state and represses Vahram’s invitation. However, he cannot successfully repress Vahram’s call because of two reasons: First, he never happened to have the chance to mourn over his friend’s departure. Hence, the libidinal ties with the lost object is still not abandoned, and if we consider a catastrophe like genocide, it will never be something closable since it is impossible to make sense of genocide. Second, if we reflect more broadly to the relationship Muhsin establishes with the lost object, Vahram and in general the Armenian theatre practitioners, this loss causes in him the emotion of fear of losing the new generations of theatre practitioners, repeatedly, just as he did lose the Armenian theatre tradition. And the absence of a love object is internalized by fear of losing his own legacy that one day maybe his efforts are also erased from the history which may even be found in Muhsin Ertuğrul’s very title of his memoir *Benden Sonra Tufan Olmasın!* [Let There be No Deluge After Me!]. This fear of loss, again, echoed in his relationship with this traumatic past. Within the given structure of the play, I argue that all these features withdrew Muhsin from mourning over his own friend Vahram and in general, the lost Armenian theatre tradition in

Turkey. Both Hamlet and Muhsin appear as figures who are having difficulty to mourn over their losses. The traumatic nature in their losses forces them to build melancholic attachments with the lost object. Now, it is substantial to further investigate the nature of their losses in order to better situate why their losses are difficult to mourn.

As I mentioned above, Hamlet's loss is difficult to mourn because he cannot make sense of his father's murder, and the subsequent marriage of his mother. It is an unthinkable murder, a fratricide that Hamlet cannot process thoroughly. Even before the Ghost's appearance, Hamlet's "prophetic soul" was incubating the possible scenarios that can shed light on his loss of his father. He always compares his father to his uncle in his mind, and tries to understand how it happened, again and again. He cannot make sense of how "wretched queen" marries his uncle in "with such dexterity to incestuous sheets!". He experiences a trauma and tries to bear witness to his father's murder. He always deals with these ideas in his mind and cannot make a total sense even after the ghost explains him the truth. In *Hamlet*, a certain way of both "knowing" and "not knowing" intersects. An urge to bear witness to the traumatic event arises; however, it cannot be translated to a conscious recognition that can end his suffering.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth follows Freud's theory of trauma to explore the complex relation of knowing and not knowing, a specific double telling of the traumatic event through literary texts. In *Beyond Pleasure Principle*, Freud defines trauma as a wound inflicted on a mind in contrast to a wound on the body. The wound on the mind cannot be easily and simply healed through bodily processes in a matter of time. Trauma is experienced "too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" and; therefore, it is not available to consciousness until it enforces itself over and over again in the nightmares and repetitive patterns of the survivor (Caruth 1996, 4). Thus, the trauma does not necessarily lie in the original event (or in the knowledge of it), but in the unassimilated nature of its own unknowability that which returns to haunt the survivor again and again. Caruth writes "What returns to haunt the victim. . . is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not been fully known" (6). And the survivor's need to go back to this traumatic event could be understood as his will to understand the traumatic event so as to control the effects of the trauma. As I described above, Hamlet also experiences a trauma because of the murder of his father, and there is a need in him to going back to the traumatic event to better make sense of it, control it. Hamlet's urge to go back and visit the traumatic experience occurred not only in a discursive level (as memorizations of his father in contrast with Claudius), or channeling his father's anger to Gertrude and Ophelia. In the play, he literally

sets the scene of murder through *Mousetrap*. On the one hand, it is to be perfectly sure of the act of fratricide (his need to make sense of the traumatic event), and on the other, it is his wish to literally evoke the act of murder, a wish to attain a certain symbolic language that both defines and defies the traumatic event at the same time, a double telling, to bring the lost object back to surface.

Also, the theme of death of the father repetitively occurs in the structure of the play. First, young Fortinbras' father is killed by King Hamlet. Later, Claudius killed Hamlet's father. Then Hamlet kills Laertes' and Ophelia's father, Polonius. Centrally, all the young characters' fathers in the play are already dead or are being killed through the course of action. The shadow of the crime "with the primal eldest curse upon't" has fallen all of these characters underlying the repetitiveness of trauma of death of the father even beyond the measures of the play, and the next generation's need to bear witness to it.

In KVO, the theme of death of the father is dealt with in terms of its specificity for the act of fratricide. Both in *Hamlet* and KVO, new political structures are being organized, and they set up obstacles, which withhold both Muhsin and Hamlet to mourn. In *Hamlet*, Claudius tries to strengthen his position as the new King. However, later in the play, both Laertes and Hamlet appear as figures who have strong supporters that can shake the new political establishment from its grounds. Also, there is a threat of Fortinbras waiting to take back the lands that his father lost to King Hamlet. The political instability in *Hamlet* resonates in KVO's depiction of the transition period from Ottoman Empire to Turkish Republic. The ethnicities living under the Empire were demanding to separate themselves from the Ottoman rule and the Empire was losing lands in the Balkans, Africa and the Middle East. World War I was started and the Ottoman political authority was experiencing the worry of losing Anatolia, too. In this politically ambiguous environment, one of the biggest crimes of humanity took place. Armenian Genocide is one of the defining moments that the violence against Armenian identity finds its culminating point and changed the relations between Turks and Armenians completely who lived together for hundreds of years. The placement of KVO, Vahram as the Ghost and Muhsin as Hamlet, evokes a notion of thinking Armenian Genocide also as an intimate murder between two ethnicities represented as two close kin. Armenian Genocide as a collective traumatic event is too an unthinkable murder, that it is inconceivable to situate the violence it brought. The *Hamlet's* act of fratricide is echoed through Armenian Genocide that sets the paradigm for Muhsin's inability to mourn over both for his friend and the Armenian theatre tradition in Turkey. The deep tension in the play, the Armenian Genocide as a silenced event, always marks Muhsin's position to Vahram and in general, the multicultural theater tradition in Turkey.

Vahram's letter stands as an injunction for Muhsin to "remember him" that which is what I think creates the melancholic attachment and the introjected fear of losing his legacy; but at the same time, the letter stands for a possibility to listen the trauma of the other, namely the Armenian Genocide's trauma that needs to be bore witness not only by Vahram but also Muhsin himself.

In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth states that "... history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, the history is the way we are implicated in each other's traumas." (24). Thus, for Muhsin, it is impossible to mourn for his friend without acknowledging the reality of the Armenian Genocide. Or to put it differently, the dominant denialist discourse in Turkey which also swallowed Muhsin in the process of Turkish nation state building, does not let him to cut the ambiguous libidinal ties with the collective lost object. On the other hand, denial also creates powerful emotions to the lost object which pertains the melancholic attachment with it. However, mourning necessitates the acknowledgment of loss in the first place. Thus, KVO's haunted stage becomes an allegory of a nation's hauntedness by the Genocide's ghosts.

Under the denialist paradigm of Turkey, I argue that Ghosts' wish to stage *Hamlet* one more time echoes Muhsin's unconscious attempt to make sense of the traumatic events that have changed the course of history and his personal life. In KVO, his constant return to the play *Hamlet*, that he himself also cannot make sense of, dramaturgically placed in the center of this traumatic past, and permits us to approach Muhsin Ertuğrul's obsessive attachment with *Hamlet* as a traumatic revisiting of the 1911 production that he staged with Vahram Papazyan. The dreamy atmosphere of the play strengthens this interpretation and opens the possibilities to think of KVO as Muhsin's Mousetrap that he unconsciously set for himself to better locate the loss of Vahram and the Armenian theater tradition. On the one hand, it will enable him to face the denialist politics that usurps the possibility to mourn. On the other hand, KVO as an artwork itself will be the exact act of bringing the lost object back, a double telling to achieve a stand in the symbolic in a certain narrative form to better understand the traumatic experience. Throughout KVO, Muhsin tries to bear witness to the lost tradition of Armenian theater practitioners in Turkey; forgotten people, events and places come back to surface. He obsessively remembers the repressed figures in that tradition that damages the hegemonic narrative of Turkish nation state and shows the fragility of his founding "father" role in terms of Turkey's history of theater.

As I discussed above, Hamlet's revenge threatens his own aliveness since it breaks the libidinal ties with the internalized lost object for sure. The same urge of delay that gets hold of Hamlet parallelly reveals as Muhsin's procrastinating the offer to

stage *Hamlet*. In one of the scenes, Vahram plays the part where Hamlet advises the actors on how to deliver the lines. After the end of the performance, Vahram turns to Muhsin and asks whether he performed well or not. Muhsin finds his handling of the character as *passee* and offers a more “contemporary” interpretation:

- MUHSİN** : What does Hamlet do throughout the play?  
**VAHRAM** : He suffers.  
**MUHSİN** : No, he plans.  
**VAHRAM** : He plans.  
**MUHSİN** : He deliberates and calculates.  
**VAHRAM** : His father says, “revenge my murder”.  
**MUHSİN** : But he constantly procrastinates.  
**VAHRAM** : He procrastinates!  
**MUHSİN** : He always procrastinates!  
**VAHRAM** : Yes, he procrastinates!  
**MUHSİN** : A graduate of Wittenberg University, Hamlet is...  
**VAHRAM** : A prince.  
**MUHSİN** : An intellectual.  
**VAHRAM** : An Intellectual!  
**MUHSİN** : Think about it as an intellectual procrastinating over his responsibilities.

Vahram finds this interpretation rather a timely analysis and wants to start rehearsals right away. He starts to play his part in Armenian:

- VAHRAM** : Yerp gı kınanayı  
ku anidzyal horyeğpayrı  
Abagya şışı mı meç  
Ayt mahadu tuynı tapets agançis!”<sup>1</sup>  
**MUHSİN** : Shall we put it off until a little later? All this talk has sparked some very nice memories. I want to write them down before I forget.

This is the one of the striking moments in the play where Vahram, as a ghost, acts the specific scene in which King Hamlet tells how he is murdered by Claudius with the

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<sup>1</sup>“Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole,/With juice of cursed hebenon in a vial,/ And in the porches of my ears did pour/ The leperous distilment,”



poison. Also, this is one of the moments where Vahram delivers his lines in Armenian rather than Turkish. Even though Muhsin got excited by the new dramaturgy crossed in his mind, he postpones rehearsing the scene by making up an excuse. Apart from being an overtly discernable linkage between Muhsin and Hamlet's delay, this scene is important in terms of how Muhsin fears hearing the story of the murder, and especially hearing it in Armenian language. Coming right after the discussion of Hamlet as an intellectual delaying his responsibilities, it shows Muhsin's both political limits as an intellectual figure and his delay of the responsibility of bearing witness to the Armenian Genocide. Parallel to *Hamlet*, Muhsin's staging *Hamlet* again, will force him to acknowledge the Armenian theatre practitioners' pioneering role and their deportation, and exclusion from Turkey's stages which may offer a cut to the ambiguous libidinal ties with the lost object. However, doing that will follow the dismantlement of his own unique position as a father figure of the Turkish theater, a kind of symbolic death of his "fatherness" in the histories of Turkey's theatre.

In the last scene of KVO, even though Muhsin accepts the ghosts offers to play *Hamlet* one more time, ghosts told him that they have to leave. Muhsin lost the chance by procrastinating the deal so long. I think this shows KVO's one of the intentions very well: KVO does not want to create an illusion or comfort of quickly "making sense" of the traumatic history that it deals with. Without facing the reality of Armenian Genocide and its destructive aftereffects both in personal and collective levels, and without breaking the ties with denialism; it is not possible to offer certain ideas of reparation or healing of the trauma. This is why, in the finale, Muhsin acts the famous "to be or not to be" soliloquy, with a new production idea of *Hamlet* in his mind, referring to the 1961 production of Hamlet in Rumeli Hisarı Fortress. Muhsin's melancholic attachment with the lost object does not end. Instead, it continues to haunt him, making his psyche occupied, still trying to bring this lost object back through art making, trying to understand the relationship of his attachment with the lost object. In the final tirade, he constantly repeats the line "Something is rotten in this state" again and again as if he talks in his sleep, wandering what happened in the country, what happened to his friend, what happened to the Armenian theatre practitioners that he once was sharing the stage with.

By tying Muhsin Ertuğrul's famous admiration of *Hamlet*, which is generally accepted as a culmination point of his pro-westernism and secularist tendencies that is one of the defining ideological characteristics of his generation of intellectuals to the concept of traumatic revisiting; KVO put the general paradigm of denialism into a severe crisis through Muhsin Ertuğrul's ambiguous relationship with this traumatic

past. I think, this dramaturgical choice plays both *Hamlet*'s and Shakespere's sterile reception as a civilizing school in Turkey. KVO lets Hamlet to haunt the contemporary Turkey's stage to reveal the unfinished businesses and utilize a new approach to *Hamlet* to start a conversation about the ghostliness of the country.



#### 4. WHAT, HAS THIS THING APPEARED AGAIN TONIGHT?

As I explained in the second chapter, the melancholic attachment with the lost object entails a continual relationship with loss. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud opposes melancholia to “normal mourning” and situated melancholic’s constant dependence to the lost object as pathological. However, he approaches this distinction with a suspicion as an inevitable polarization and he states that “It is really only because we know so well how to explain [mourning] that this attitude does not seem to us pathological.” (Freud 1917, 244). This explanation offers the possibility that if melancholia is further explored and understood, then it’s addressing as pathology will be changed. Following from Freudian premises, in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*, Eng and Kazancian argues that a better understanding of the concepts of melancholia and melancholic attachment to loss will de-pathologize melancholia and this will help to approach melancholia in creative ways to understand the social and political aspects of loss (Eng, Kazancian 2003, 3). Further, they point out Freud’s different elaborations on the concept of past in mourning and melancholia. In the former, the past is declared as resolved and finished since libidinal ties are gone at the end of the mourning process; however, in the latter, the past remains unsolved and alive (4). In melancholia, the past is still haunting the present moment, causing a “past” that does not pass. Eng and Kazancian argue that the melancholic’s constant struggle with the lost object is not “a ‘grasping’ and ‘holding’ on a fixed notion of the past, [rather] a continuous engagement with loss and its remains.” (4). This understanding opens up the possibility to read the past as an alive entity for the political and social work of the present. Thus, returning to the lost object could energize and evoke a variety of different possibilities to make sense of the loss through the present moment. I think, KVO is such an attempt by forcing its protagonist Muhsin Ertuğrul to face this contested past and offering further elaborations to comprehend these traumas and silences by re-enacting past events and people. KVO engages with this struggle of performing the past to be able to offer a dissimilar perception of the historical event and it’s construction in the present-day conditions.

## 4.1 Performing History and the Performer as Witness

Theorists of theatre and performance further explored the above-mentioned relation of theatre with difficult pasts and the repetitive nature of theater without a necessary melancholic attachment to loss. In the *Haunted Stage*, Marvin Carlson argues that from the very beginnings of the performance history, the art of theater has always been an experience of repetition: “The present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the process of recycling and recollection” (Carlson 2004, 2). He suggests approaching theatrical performances as things that “we see before” both in terms of the actions resonating in our memories at both personal and collective levels, and also in the technical sense of the performance that the actors playing the same play, maybe in the same space, subjects, actions or emotions again and again. Thus, the theatre recycles and recollects past experiences and impressions in imaginary configurations by making a connection with the present moment haunted with a sense of repetition. I think this idea becomes more concrete when we think about the performances which specifically perform the past events and people when dealing with the contested pasts. The theatrical medium enables an organized repetition of the past and locates the chaotic or catastrophic events of the past in an aesthetic body. The act of re-enactment of the historical events and people force us to think on these representations’ ghostly quality in difficult histories. In *Performing History*, Frederick Rokem observes that the ghostly quality of the performance can be traced in *Hamlet* by contemplating on the question of Marcellus (in First Quarto) or Horatio (in the Second Quarto) : “What, has this thing appeared again tonight?”

"What can be seen in Hamlet is how a burden (some kind of unfinished business from the past) becomes transformed into an actor's being and doing "this thing" on the stage, appearing again in tonight's performance, continuously performing a return of the repressed on the theatrical stage" (Rokem 2000,13).

Rokem here explores Marcellus or Horatio's question's implications of repressed ghostly figures and events reappearing on the stage on the metatheatrical level as “real” figures from the past. The ghost of *Hamlet* appears to distort the newly emerging political construction as a totally fictional character. But as Rokem suggests, “When these ghosts are historical figures, they [inevitably] perform history” (6). KVO as a biographical play, which is heavily based on historical documents

enables to reflect on the the question of how the representation of the “real” events and characters are “recycled” and “recollected” in the fabric of the play. In the following pages I will consider KVO’s attempt to perform the history of the “return of the repressed” by closely analyzing the relations it builds with the historical document (archive) and recycling/ distortion of these documents. Later, I will consider the ways to approach the performer’s potential to bear witness on the stage.

KVO is a biographical play built around two real historical figures, Muhsin Ertuğrul and Vahram Papazyan, and one fictional character Arusyak/ Latife Hanım, who is inspired by a historical figure Kadriye Hanım. The central archival materials that the group benefited from are two memoirs: one is Muhsin Ertuğrul’s memoir *Benden Sonra Tufan Olmasın*, another one is Vahram Papazyan’s *Sırdis Barktı*. The other main historical document is M. Kemal’s column called “Temaşamızda Türk Kadını” published in Darülbedayi magazine. Even though the group essentially built KVO’s structure around these three main texts, there is an extensive archival research behind the composition of the play ranging from different memoirs and accounts of Muhsin Ertuğrul’s contemporaries and history books on Turkey’s theatre. In order to better grasp the relationship that the play establishes with the historical sources, it is necessary to explain the complex structure of the play.

KVO’s structure consists of three different layers. The first layer consists the scenes where Muhsin works on his memoir, remembering the past events and people, recollecting and chronicling through the main action of writing, mostly alone. These scenes concentrate on how he was writing his personal history and his greater aim of recording the history of Turkey’s theatre. The second layer in which the main action takes place is the dreamy scenes where ghosts haunt Muhsin to offer to play *Hamlet* one more time, and Muhsin’s delay of this proposal. The confrontation with the ghosts is realized through these scenes where the ghosts manipulate Muhsin’s memory and discuss the validity of his memoir. The third layer incorporates flashbacks where ghosts intrigue in Muhsin something to remember or when they want to introduce a new perspective of what had happened in this contested past. However, I should also add that these scenes are not flashbacks as traditionally defined. Rather than turning to the past event, the past intervenes in the present moment through Ghosts’ manipulation of Muhsin’s memory. Thus, it should be noted that the lines between the past and present are not concrete, not well defined. These scenes remove Muhsin’s centrality in the play and concentrate on ghosts’ memories and actions showing their own perspectives in that history. They comprise the historical events from the second constitutional era to Muhsin’s becoming the head of Darülbedayi, not necessarily in a chronological order.

While the fictional structure is based on three levels, KVO builds four different types of engagement with the historical material. The strategies to deal with the documents can be summarized as follows: The first one is the usage of the historical document just as they are, without any interruption or change. These include Vahram Papazyan's letter, the direct citation of the sentences from Muhsin Ertuğrul and Vahram Papazyan's memoirs, and the official record that document the censorship of the German film *Die Frau Mit Den Millionen* that Muhsin Ertuğrul acted in 1922. The second usage is the scenes where the historical document is operated as a starting point to imagine the stories of Vahram and Arusyak/Latife Hanım. These scenes include Vahram Papazyan's escape narrative from the Ottoman police with the help of Arap İzzet, which is borrowed from Papazyan's memoir or Latife's background story on how she disguised as Arusyak in order to perform on stage from M. Kemal's article. The third one is the scenes which are built again on historical accounts; however, the time, place and names are changed along with the purposes of the structure of the play. Most of the flashback scenes are included in this category. The fourth and the last strategy is the total abandonment of the historical document and imagining an alternative confrontation between these three characters. These scenes create the obscure "present" time of the play, in which the main action of confrontation is taking place.

As I outlined above, KVO uses a variety of techniques to perform this contested past. Sometimes the historical documents are directly cited, giving a sense of documentary quality to the play. But sometimes this documentation is distorted by playing with the documents' bonds to exact location, time and people involving the event that is taking place. In this regard, KVO is not easily locatable to either a documentary play genre or as a sheer fiction. Rather, KVO embraces a dialectical relation with its historical sources, constantly exploring the possibilities of the past in the present. Walter Benjamin observes this dialectical relation of the past and present as a constellation: "It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (Benjamin 1999, 463). I think KVO uses theatre's possibility as a "constellation" to depict certain conflict-ing images, and these conflicts are the main reasons why KVO approaches critically to historical documents when performing history. The historical document is not taken for granted as to revive the original 'truth' that governs the relations between these three characters and the history that the documents depict. It is approached from a critical distance, with a suspicion that enables questioning the validity of the archival material that it deals with. I argue that this strategy of playing with the archival material and distorting the majestic voice of the chronicle in the theatrical

performances of history is closely related to the model of Epic theater proposed by Bertolt Brecht, who also had started creating his theory by converting the meaning of “epic” to manipulate the given structures of theater.

The definition of the word epic is “a long narrative poem in elevated style recounting the deeds of a legendary or historical hero”.<sup>1</sup> The typical examples of the heroic narratives are represented in the works of Ancient Greek tragedies and mostly portrayed in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. However, the meaning of the term epic is distorted and redefined as a genre by Bertolt Brecht to describe a modern theatrical style as opposed to all kinds of dramatic styles appeared in the history of theater, but especially against the realist bourgeois theatre, which is the most dominant one in his time.

Brecht’s initial concern with these theatrical traditions lies in the prioritization of emotions to “educate” or “entertain” the audience by invoking emotions like pity, fear, hatred while causing a catharsis by identification with the character rather than appealing to the audience’s reason. Brecht “refuses Aristotelian catharsis, the purging of the emotions through identification with the destiny which rules the hero’s life.” (Benjamin 1998, 18). This opposition is a political one since Brecht tries to revolutionize the theater on the basis of rational thinking to create resistance to oppressive regimes: “Fascism’s grotesque emphasising of the emotions, and perhaps no less a certain decline of the rational element in the Marxist teaching, led me personally to lay particular stress on the rational” (Unwin 2016, 21).

To be able to create a dramatization that allows the audience to critically examine the performance, Brecht used the “alienation effect”. The primary goal of the alienation effect is to eliminate the immersion of the audience to the performance: “When something seems ‘the most obvious thing in the world’ it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up” (Brecht 1964, 71). Thus, the purpose of epic theater was to make the familiar unfamiliar, the natural unnatural in a social setting where actions are represented as constructed by certain ideologies. The alienation effect serves for opening the veil of mystery over what is conceived as unchangeable and unbreakable: “The object of the V-effect is to alienate the social gest [gestus] underlying every incident. By social gest is meant the mimetic gestural expression of the social relationships prevailing between people in a given period” (139). Once the audience can recognize the relations of domination and subjugation within a social system in an actor’s performance, then there might also appear the tools of resistance against the injustices, inequalities and oppressions exercised by

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<sup>1</sup>Merriam Webster, s.v. “epic,” accessed December 16, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epic>

the hegemonic structures. The essence of epic theatre is to encourage audiences to think of alternatives for their lives and social conditions they are living in and encourages a break with conformity with the oppressive systems.

KVO's main strategy of playing with the archive to question its validity by distortion resonates with the alienation effect's defamiliarization of any given and solid narrative. The same urge to introduce a new dimension on the dominant discourse at the present moment, especially on the subjects, which are taken for granted like the reception of the history of Turkey's theater and Muhsin Ertuğrul's unique position in these narratives are disfigured. In KVO, the archival material is alienated to bring a possibility to write the history of Turkey's theater without being ethnocentric, denialist, assimilationist and mainstream. Also, the tradition of history writing that is strongly dedicated to the archive as a truth bearing entity is subverted through showing how silences and censorship mechanisms are inherent parts in the attempts of recording the history of Turkey's theater. These criticisms of the progressive and empiricist traditions of history writing create a powerful source of humor in the play. This effective usage of the humor further strengthens the audience's relationship with the discussions, giving a sense of aliveness to the historical subjects with which most of the audience is probably never aware of their existence.

KVO also borrows elements from the Brechtian Epic in terms of its structure. The montage technique and tableaux narrative are used when the scenes are dissolving into one another. This helps to make the complex structure of the play better available for the audience and also provides pauses for the audience to think and reflect on the scenes they watch. Moreover, the performers are also acting in an epic style in terms of situating a rational distance between the characters they perform and themselves. This non-identification with the character is observable through the action in all characters, especially in Cüneyt Yalaz's performance of Muhsin. At some moments, Yalaz performs Muhsin within a conscious distance where he wants to criticize the character himself in accordance with the play's dramaturgical touch. For example, the critical gestus of the play, the "erasing" of his memories and writings is always underlined by his performance in a subtle way.

Further, this sense of alienation with the character does not only operate while actors perform their main character (Muhsin, Vahram or Arusyak/Latife), but also each actor performs several characters in the play. In the biographical plays, this is a rather unusual thing since there is a wish to revive the historical events as they are, so the continuity of the character is vital for the audience to identify with the story and the historical figure on the stage. KVO does not bother with such a process of identification with the character and further divides the actor's performance. Before



delving into the significance of this artistic choice, I want to provide Brecht's idea of proper staging of the theatrical event and character to be able to trace what KVO offers as performing history.

In his 1938 essay called "The Street Scene", Brecht concentrates on how the theatrical event is constituted through a simple daily act of a car accident:

"For practical experiments I usually picked as my example of completely simple, 'natural' epic theatre an incident such as can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place. The bystanders may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may 'see things a different way'; the point is that the demonstrator [actor] acts the behaviour of driver or victim or both in such a way that the bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident" (Brecht 1978, 121).

This illustration is very telling to see how a theatrical scene is open to different interpretations by the very specific choices of the actors. Actor's performance of the "accident" to the bystanders, in this context to the audience, inevitably is based on a certain subject position and perspective, and the performance of the scene is re-enacted through the actor's ideological prism at the present moment. Thinking this relation within the theatrical plays attempting to perform history, the actor's role as an "eyewitness" carries the potential to become the witness of the historical events that he or she is re-enacting to "form an opinion" on the bystander audiences about the historical "accidents". Within the given eyewitness position of the actor by Brecht, this attempt of witnessing does not have to proclaim an objectivity or neutrality since the actor is already performing out of a certain subjective position. I think, KVO's artistic choice to make each actor perform more than one character multiplies the specific subject positions to a historical event represented in the play. By its nature, staging more than three characters gives way to voice a variety of different subjective positions in a historical event, and this polyphony nourishes the discussions' richness. This choice is in line with the play's attempt of performing/re-enacting the multicultural and multiethnic fabric of the society. In this way, the history as not an absolute, one sided activity is further reinforced with the specific acting style. Thus, the actors become available to bear witness to different perspectives, criticizing the "original" and "authentic" reality as a single and absolute experience. This serves a lively environment for the audience and provides them with the conflating and conflicting accounts to the same historical events. Thus, with this acting choice, the performance of the historical characters neither appears

as eternal victims who are constantly oppressed under the cruel and tyrant oppressors, which would lead to a problematic representation of victimhood nor the equal citizens who were living in harmony and equality in a utopian environment, which would lead a mistaken wishful thinking.

Now, I want to further the discussion on the actors' potential to appear as an alternative witness to the historical events. Following the Brechtian idea of an actor as an eyewitness, Rokem also sees a potential in actor's performance to serve as a fusing link between the historical past and the fictitious here and now of the theatrical event. Rokem borrows Stephen Greenblatt's observations that the theatrical plays from the distant pasts (Greenblatt specifically refers to Shakespeare plays) carries "social energies" from the times they were written and by staging them in the present, the social energies of the past become the part of aesthetic fabric of the present. In *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Greenblatt asserts that the reason behind the four hundred years old plays of Shakespeare still resonates with the current audience is the originally coded social energies they have:

"The 'life' that literary works seem to possess long after both the death of the author and the death of the culture for which the author wrote is the historical consequence, however transformed and refashioned, of the social energy initially encoded in those works" (Greenblatt 1988,188).

Following from the concept of social energies, Rokem expands Greenblatt's text-based analysis to the performance of the text and states that these social energies embedded in the texts communicates to the contemporary audience to "include the sense in which the actors are able to bring the energies of a specific historical event to the audience today" (Rokem 2000, 194). In contrast to the views of theatre's deficiency as a historical enterprise, Rokem argues that the theatrical performances can be understood as "historiographic". For Rokem, this historiographic quality lies in the craft of acting, and the actors are the ones who are "performing history". Rokem suggests that "Performing history means to reenact certain condition or characteristic traits inherent in such historical events, presenting them to the spectators through the performance" (13). As I mentioned above, he sees a potential in acting to serve as a connecting link between the "real" past events and the fictional theatrical event happening on stage. He coined the term "hyper- historian" who makes it probable for the actor's "redoing" or "reappearing" as something that actually existed in the past. However, he also states that even though an actor has the ability to serve as a connecting link, this does not mean that these theatrical events actors perform are

the historical events themselves. For him, to understand the conditions for an actor to turn to a “hyper- historian”, one should examine the aesthetic potential of the “actor’s body” along with his or her emotions and ideological commitments realized on stage as “aesthetic materials” through different strategies of embodiment (13). If an actor completes such a process, then “the creative energies of theatre can [...] be seen as a force that becomes a dialectical antidote to the destructive energies of history and its painful failures” (192).

Rokem’s argument sounds controversial in terms of the actor’s ability to become the “actual” historical witness on stage as the “hyper historian”. He states certain prerequisites for an actor to become a “hyper- historian” which, I believe, looks vague and obscure in terms of the obscurity of how the actor’s body is transformed to aesthetic materials using what specific embodiment strategies to reenact the past. These specific embodiment techniques are not clearly defined in his analysis. Also, the emphasis on the “actual” witness further complicates the issue of witnessing, especially concerning the theatrical performances dealing with the difficult pasts which I believe is a speculative quality that Rokem also does not pay enough time to further define its limits. However, Rokem’s analysis opens up an ethical discussion to evaluate the actor’s work, whether the performer’s representation brings “destructive” or constructive energies to the past that it deals with. Moreover, Rokem points out another fruitful discussion on the representational quality of the theatrical performance as witnessing through its historiographic nature. If the assertion of historical documents as witnessing the historical reality is accepted, why not it would not be possible for the actors’ performance to maintain the same relation with the historical past since both the former and the latter are representations of the historical event through different mediums. What I think crucial in Rokem’s argument of “hyper- historian” is the way it describes the actor’s potential to serve as an “dialectical antidote” against what he calls “the destructive energies” and “painful failures” of the past. If the performer achieves such relation with the past he or she performs, then the historical event and figures become questionable and reproachable within the light of present conditions. Thus, I must admit that even though the term hyper-historian is a vague concept, it provides useful critical engagement with the actors’ performance of history.

In KVO, performers question the validity of the narratives of Turkey’s theater by showing how silences and hegemonic power relations came up with one-sided accounts. The hyper- historian’s specific attitude of reflecting the tensions of the historical event and the present-day conditions can be detectable on the actors’ body while they are engaging with these events through a Brechtian defamiliarization style of acting. This can be seen in certain examples throughout the play. For

example, Banu Açıkdenez's double performance of Arusyak/ Latife intrigues a sense of splitness not only by changing from one character to another but also Açıkdenez herself created another layer in her performance that is protesting the given representational regime to the women on the histories of Turkey's theater. In the scene where she is performing the Ophelia's famous tirade<sup>2</sup> in order to be included in the imaginary *Hamlet* production, she mimics the famous prima donna's historical delivery in her performance in an exaggerated vulnerability and fragility which its "fakeness" creates a distance in audience to identify with it. However, her male audience (Vahram and Muhsin) claps her back because of her "naive" delivery of the performance and says that she is a "true Ophelia". This scene parodies how the male gaze over the character Ophelia prioritizes its reception only as a vulnerable figure resonating the early Republican period's foregrounding of actresses as domestic figures who must not carry the potential to thread the given patriarchal order. However, Açıkdenez's exaggerated acting undermines this given role, and ridicules the need to see Ophelia only as a weak and defenseless character along with the project of making the domesticated modern Turkish actress. Additionally, this alienation backed acting style helps to convey the impression that the character is not "resurrected" but rather "represented" on the stage, giving the clues of the double performance of her character.

Another example is a scene where the "zealots" raid the film set where Muhsin and Vahram were shooting the film adaptation of Yakup Kadri Karaosmanoğlu's novel *Nur Baba*. This scene concentrates on their running away from the zealots where Vahram is physically attacked by the reactionary public since he is performing a Muslim cult leader as an Armenian actor. The scene is built on both Papazyan and Ertuğrul's memoirs' cross reading of this event. This event takes place in 1922, when there is a legal possibility for Vahram to turn back to İstanbul and work, live and act in the city. A legal right was given to Armenians, Greeks and Jews in 1918 to turn back from the refugee camps, which are dispersed around the Ottoman lands to return to their homelands (Shaw 1998, 57). However, this was a very hard process since lots of people are already murdered, assimilated or dispersed around the world. The ones who wanted to turn back to homelands could not find their possessions, houses or workplaces where they left. Also, there was still a powerful conflict between Turks and the non- Muslim communities. The WWI's effects are still strongly operating the relations both among the public and administrative organs. However, the denialist historians of Turkey's history use this law as a "reparative" instance

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<sup>2</sup>"There's fennel for you, and columbines. There's rue for you; and here's some for me. We may call it herb-grace o' Sundays. O you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy. I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died."

for the deported Armenians and accuses “Armenian or Pro- Armenian Western historians” as not giving the needed attention to this historical phase: “They have shown great effort to curtail the returned Armenians. This is for the reason that questioning of the return would inevitably open the way for questioning of the genocide.” (Günaydın 2007, 3). Under a still denialist paradigm in Turkey, KVO stages this historical event as follows: Banu Açıkdeniz wears a faceless white mask and a black coat, performs an aggressive dance with a stick in her hand as the “zealots” trying to catch Vahram and Muhsin to kill them. Vahram and Muhsin flee and they speak with each other while they are running:

- MUHSİN** : Why did you exaggerate the imam’s drunkenness so much? The more those zealots gathered, the more over-the-top you became!
- VAHRAM** : Wasn’t it you who said the imam should be funny?
- MUHSİN** : Yes! But did you really have to go that far? There is such a thing as film acting. Like Buster Keaton for example! The Great Stone Face!
- VAHRAM** : I was acting in the Italian style, okay? (They scatter) Chibidibi veratarnayi! I shouldn’t have come back from Armenia!
- MUHSİN** : If only you hadn’t!
- VAHRAM** : I shouldn’t have accepted that role!
- MUHSİN** : If only you hadn’t! If only you hadn’t!
- VAHRAM** : So, who was saying, “Vahram, this is just the role for you!”
- MUHSİN** : But this really was just the role for you Vahram!
- VAHRAM** : You’re right...
- MUHSİN** : Who should I have cast instead? Galip? That idiot Şadi?
- VAHRAM** : But didn’t I nail it! They scatter. By the way, don’t think I didn’t hear you shout when the zealots attacked, “I’m not Turkish, I’m German” (Impersonating Muhsin) Ich bin Deutsch! Ich bin Deutsch!
- MUHSİN** : Well, who was begging for the help of the French Foreign Legion? (Impersonating Vahram.) Aidez-moi, aidez-moi! Let’s split up. This isn’t going to work. Let’s meet at your uncle’s this evening.
- VAHRAM** : (Swearing in Armenian.) Pozizavak!

- MUHSİN** : Don't swear Vahram, I know that much Armenian.  
**VAHRAM** : I'm not swearing at you, I'm swearing at my uncle.  
**MUHSİN** : At your uncle? Why?  
**VAHRAM** : The swine took our possessions. He took what was left behind by the Armenians who fled Istanbul.

At the end of the scene the two promised each other to meet at Vahram's uncle's house; however, Papazyan turns to Armenia for sure after this incident, and Vahram and Muhsin never see each other again. The *Nur Baba* is finished without Vahram Papazyan and his part is acted by Muhsin Ertuğrul, who had no other choices because nobody wanted to play this character.

I think this scene is important in a couple of ways to see KVO's strategies of performing the past, and the actor's role of witnessing in it. First, it disturbs the generally accepted discourse of "reparation" by the denialist writers as many numbers of Armenians returned to their homelands. Through Vahram's story, this scene explores the possible dangerous and life-threatening conditions waiting for the Armenians when they return. Also, it criticizes the discourse around this "return" as if it is a "gift" given the non-Muslim communities to veil the catastrophic nature of the genocide. Given the tense atmosphere of the scene, especially with the horrific portrayal of the "zealots" with a mimicless mask resonating a faceless, inhumane act of blind violence; Vahram and Muhsin's text is written with lots of comedic elements that balances the tension in the scene to not only "scare" the audience but also enable them to reflect on the conditions that the characters are in. As one of the KVO's tactics of performing the difficult past, with the possible sense of relief that comes with the laughter is transformed in a second with a dramatic punchline that suddenly "reminds" the audience about the horrific nature of the events. İlker Yasin Keskin (Vahram) and Cüneyt Yalaz's (Muhsin) performances in this scene operate in such a way that plays with the audience's perception of what they are watching is a comedy or a drama. With the Vahram's closing line, which is a very dangerous sentence to act since it reflects about the injustices happening between two Armenian characters, performed and written by Turkish theatre practitioners that carries the potential to cultivate what Rokem called "destructive energies". However, Keskin's performance is free from this capacity because of the ambiguous nature of his acting throughout the scene and also Cüneyt Yalaz as the Turkish character in this scene does not give any reaction to this line. This ambiguity reflects Vahram's general disappointment of returning to Turkey ("I shouldn't come back from Armenia"). He was expecting better living conditions for himself to live and work in İstanbul; however, his hopes soon diminished since he literally escaped death when the "zealots"

attacked. This shows him the new living conditions in Turkey for an Armenian actor which necessitates cultural assimilation or performing only stereotypical characters. Thus, he leaves İstanbul and returns to Armenia. Both the scene's structure and actors' performances underline what Rokem defined as the actor's potential to revive the historical past through the present ideological relations. In this scene, this potential is revived through showing how the so-called "reparational" character of the 1918 law does not actually function in that way, and the still existing denialism is contrasted with the violent acts against Vahram Papazyan. Also, Keskin's performance strengthened the disappointment of the Vahram Papazyan, who constructed a link in the present day, still existing hate crimes and violent acts against Armenians in Turkey.<sup>3</sup> All these dramaturgical nuances and actors' detailed performances enables the grounds for performer's ability to bear witness to the historical event by re-introducing the complex historical conditions of the past to the audience of today. In a way, through actors' performance, the historical event is re-enacted on stage to carve out a specific significance on the audience's reception of the demonstrated event by calling the audience to make comparisons with the past event and present conditions.

When performing history, KVO does not avoid building a critical relation with the historical events, documents and characters that it portrays. The real power of its representational quality lies in its constant struggle with the past through the lens of the present, and KVO does not hide this, instead reveals it. I think this attitude is in line with the Brechtian Epic's defamiliarization technique. One of the strong aims of the performance is to enable the audience to see this contested past in a new and different aspect as Brecht formulated as the ultimate aim of theater by alienating the given narratives to introduce fresh perspectives. Just like Brecht's Galileo, the contested scientist-witness who makes us to see the "world" from a different perspective, KVO's take on its historical characters and events invites spectators to see them in a different light. And the actors' careful and elaborative performances further strengthen their witnessing to the historical events that the play deals with.

## 4.2 Historian's Function in *Hamlet* and KVO

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<sup>3</sup>In the 2019 report of "Hate Speech and Discriminatory Discourse in Media" conducted by Hrant Dink Foundation documents that Armenians are exposed to hate speech and discrimination more than any other groups in Turkey: retrieved from: <https://hrantdink.org/attachments/article/2664/Nefret-soylemi-ve-Ayrimci-Soylem-2019-Raporu.pdf>

KVO is vastly based on historical documents, and when performing the past, it builds a critical relation with these documents both at the textual level and the actors' enactment of the text. In this regard, since the main struggle of the play is to show how Muhsin recorded the history of Turkey's theater, KVO also becomes an allegory of the historian's process of writing history, selecting his archive and constructing the narrative. The play is also about the history writing process itself and problematizing this process through Muhsin Ertuğrul's attempt of the so-called objectivity and reality that he ascribed to his memoir. By showing Muhsin's censorship tendencies and silencing the historical document and his memories, KVO portrays how the present-day ideologies and perceptions of the past are governing the relations of history writing process, questions the "objectivity" of Muhsin's memoir along with the histories of Turkey's theater. Thus, rather than the narration of historical events as they appear in the historical documents, KVO discusses the possibilities and difficulties of the biographical subject's understanding of the past images, "constellations" in the present tense. In that sense, if the historical documents suffice the one aspect to understand KVO's "recycling" the past, then the *Hamlet* appears as another reference point to further explore this relationship. Although there are references to other artistic works like Taniel Varujan's poem "Çartı" [The Massacre] or Arusyak/Latife's costume, which is borrowed from the painting "Ophelia" by John Everett Millais, I want to specifically concentrate on *Hamlet* since it appears not only as an intertextual reference but an essential text that KVO negotiates its structure with.

Now, I want to return to Rokem's emphasis on the question of "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?" in relation to performing the past. As I mentioned above, by interpreting this question with its metatheatrical resonance of the actor's performance, Rokem argues that theatrical event is also a recapitulation of the historical event, just like the historical document. Thus, theatrical plays capacity to perform the past can also be accepted as historiographies just as practiced in the history books. The ghost's haunting in *Hamlet* is to tell him the story of murder, giving his historical account on this event, his "repressed" narrative. KVO uses this structure to play with the magistrate voice of its chronicle Muhsin, by letting Vahram and Arusyak/ Latife to haunt the stage, providing their narrations of the past events. Given the command of the ghosts in the plays, both Muhsin and Hamlet are being called for "recording" an alternative version of the history that necessitates going against the grains of the present politics of history making.

I argue that Hamlet's urge for revenge can also be read as his duty of recording a different kind of history, which is more explicitly expressed in KVO with the call to stage *Hamlet* one more time to re-write the history of Turkey's theatre. I think,



Hamlet's attempt to record the history, and ironically it is in the form of theatre, is *Mousetrap*:

**HAMLET** : For murder, though it has no tongue, will speak  
With most miraculous organ  
I'll have these players  
Play something like the murder of my father  
Before mine uncle. (2.2.580-583)

Here, Hamlet speaks his mind on the potential of theater to bear witness to the historical "real". It is not re-enacting the exact historical event, but it can provide "something like" what happened in the past. There is another interesting parallelism between *Hamlet* and *KVO* as both of the plays see a potential in theatre to revive the past and play with the dominant narrative of its time. For Hamlet, *Mousetrap* is "... The play's the thing/ Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." (2.2.591-592), and *KVO*'s imaginary *Hamlet* is the necessary confrontation with the difficult past that is ignored and denied. Hamlet also charges Horatio to bear witness with him, to detect the Claudius' sign of murder. By that, he makes Horatio as a second witness to this history, which, in the metatheatrical level, resonates the audience's participation to the *Mousetrap*, and generally the play itself.

In the final scene of *Hamlet*, Ghost's dictum is executed, revenge is taken, and most of the main characters are dead except the dear friend Horatio. Hamlet is lying on the ground, poisoned, he is a few seconds away from death. His loyal friend Horatio also wants to kill himself. However, Hamlet does not let him die:

**HAMLET** : Give me the cup. Let go. By heaven, I'll ha't!  
O God, Horatio, what a wounded name,  
Things standing thus unknown, shall live behind  
me!  
If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart  
Absent thee from felicity awhile  
And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,  
To tell my story (5.2.329-335).

Hamlet saves Horatio's life to tell his story. In a way, the role of the historian is transferred to Horatio, who will sustain the Shakespearean Restoration at the end of the play by telling Denmark's story and Hamlet's consent to Fortinbras to take over Denmark. This creates a sense of catharsis to the spectators since Hamlet's story would become known and carried over to the public. By that, the public will eventually be informed of the evil acts of Claudius, and in a way, justice will

be sustained. Horatio narrates the unfortunate and bloody historical events that have taken place in Denmark and the play ends with Fortinbras' commemoration of Hamlet. With this cathartic ending, the historian's bearing witness to the "repressed" historical event is glorified and the Horatio's narrative appears as the sole or prioritized witness account in accessing this history.

In KVO, the audience is also called to bear witness to the imaginary *Hamlet* production that is negotiated between Muhsin and the ghosts; however, this production could not be staged. By delaying ghosts' offer too long, Muhsin loses this chance. And KVO becomes a story of the *Hamlet* that Muhsin and ghosts cannot play together. Instead of a restoration, KVO underlines Muhsin's melancholic attachment to the past, and poses obstacles to offer such restorations or reparations. Rather than giving simple answers, KVO puts its historian Muhsin to an uncomfortable state, and encourages him to reconsider his writings. As I described in the second chapter, Muhsin's final tirade contains another return to the past, the 1961 production of Hamlet in Rumeli Hisari Fortress, and signals that this return to the past will not end. Muhsin the historian is left to the conflation of past and present.

In contrast to *Hamlet*, KVO does not provide catharsis to the audience, instead, calls the audience's witnessing to become the participants on the activity of thinking about or on this difficult past. The sub- title of the play, *The Last Hamlet of Muhsin Bey* is undermined, and the emphasis is put on the first part: *Who's there?*, marking the question, rather than the explanation. The unstageable *Hamlet* production continues to haunt audiences too through their witnessing of this difficult past. And the question of "What, has this thing appeared again tonight?", the acts of performing history, the "return of the repressed" is juxtaposed with the Muhsin's question of "Who's there?"; together continuously pointing to a past that is hard to close. However, the play does not interpret Muhsin's confusion as a dark, exitless experience; rather, this return to the past is staged with its potentials of reconsiderations and openness to arouse fresh ways of thinking and doing history, encouraging Muhsin to revise his manuscript.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I try to examine the theatrical plays' potential to represent the historical events and people, especially when dealing with the difficult pasts. I look at the intrinsic quality of silencing that is operating in the accounts of Turkey's theatre history. To this end, I closely analyzed the biographical play *Kim Var Orada? Muhsin Bey'in Son Hamleti* [Who's There? The Last Hamlet of Muhsin Bey] along with Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to better situate KVO to the aforementioned objectives of my inquiry. I observed the operational character of silencing in the histories of Turkey's theater in terms of Armenian and women representations, and argued for their underperformance for not saving enough scholarly attention to these groups. I also underlined the fact that the Turkish nationalist fervor as a key ideological tool abject some subjects as undesired and eliminated them from the historical records. As a lead symbol in this project, I analyzed KVO's careful handling of the Muhsin Ertuğrul myth, approaching his legacy from a critical distance, and investigating his ambiguous position in this transition period from Ottoman Empire to the Republic of Turkey by demystifying his cultic reception.

Moreover, I considered KVO's handling of the Armenian Genocide without representing it, but creating an effect that always intervenes to the fabric of the performance as a deep current governing the relations between the characters. The play further invokes the idea that the Armenian Genocide as a cultural trauma not only haunts the Armenian people but also effecting the people living in the present day Turkey from any ethnicity as a collective loss. While the denialist paradigm is perpetuating its destructive character through various dimensions, with physical and discursive violence; art making appears as a powerful reminder of the ghostliness of this country, of the unfinished businesses with the past that one way or another we experience collectively, and we all belong.

Art making, in particular theatrical plays and performances, introduces us to the ways to communicate with difficult pasts that we are negotiating with or without acknowledging, everyday. Ideas about performing the past through performer's witnessing opens up possibilities for theatrical plays to deepen their ability to engage

these histories and sustain more fruitful representations and discussions for audiences. These theatrical energies may not promise the potential reparation, but at least bring up the overlooked tensions by reminding the past's constitutive effects on the present and possible futures.

Rather than a continuum with the line of “fathers” as Claudius advised, the “fathers” of theatre in Turkey, and their underlying attitude against theatre as a moralist educational tool serving a consensus within the general paradigm to propagate barren ideologies; I believe KVO put forward disagreements, discontinuities and resistance with a playful and creative manner. KVO asks one more time to reconsider to “play *Hamlet*”, to the history we have, from today, as if going back to reassess will make sense this time. I must say the urge is admirable and respectable, but the history, with its tendency to rhyme itself, breaks hopes and ideas about peace. This is why I think it is necessary to continue to cultivate a belief in the act of looking back. It is necessary to embrace the cry that comes out of the wound. The cry that haunts Muhsin in the middle of the night when he was writing his memories, and giving him a nightmare, to wake him up, and to listen to the story that the wound will talk about.

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