

# An Analysis of Identity Crisis and Turkish Dramatic Criticism through Dinçer Sümer's *Old Photographs*

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## Abstract

Dinçer Sümer's play *Old Photographs* is often dismissed by scholars as the story of a prostitute although it contains lingual and social elements about the politics of identity that pursues the dilemmas and conflicts Turkey experienced in the 1970s. First part of this article highlights how the fractures and unification of narratives in *Old Photographs* manifest an opposition to conventional structure of characters and plot, and refuse the fixity and formula of traditional drama. Thus, characters in the play are unique as they defy categorization and resist conceptualization. By disturbing grand narratives and focusing on identity crisis, *Old Photographs* deserves more textual scrutiny.

The article also focuses on scholarly works that analyze *Old Photographs* and displays the problem in Turkish literary theory which focuses on drawing categories rather than scrutinizing textual merits of individual works. This problem in critical theory results in an impartial and inaccurate portrayal of Turkish drama.

**Keywords:** Dinçer Sümer, Eski Fotoğraflar, Turkish Theatre, Identity Crisis.

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# Dinçer Sümer'in Eski Fotoğraflar Adlı Oyunu Üzerinden Kimlik Krizi ve Türk Tiyatro Eleştirisi Anlayışının Analizi

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## Öz

Dinçer Sümer'in *Eski Fotoğraflar* (1976) adlı oyunu, Türkiye'nin 1970'lerde yaşadığı çatışmaları anlatan kimlik siyasetine ilişkin dilsel ve sosyal unsurlar barındırır da tiyatro insanları tarafından bir fahişenin hikâyesi olarak sınıflandırılmış ve genel olarak dikkate alınmamıştır. Makalenin ilk kısmı, *Eski Fotoğraflar*'daki anlatıların, kırılmalarının geleneksel karakter ve olay örgüsüne karşı bir yeniliği nasıl ortaya çıkardığını, sanatın gerçek hayatla ilişkisini yeniden tanımlamayı, geleneksel dramın sabitliğini ve hayatı formüle etme çabasını reddetmeyi amaçladığını vurguluyor. Bu nedenle, oyundaki karakterler sınıflandırmaya meydan okudukları ve kavramsallaştırmaya direndikleri için benzersizdir. Büyük anlatılara karşı marjinal insanların yerel öykülerine odaklanarak, *Eski Fotoğraflar*, kendi zamanın ötesinde bir oyun olarak daha fazla metinsel ve dramaturjik incelemeyi hak etmektedir. Makalenin ikinci bölümü, *Eski Fotoğraflar*'ı analiz eden ve bu oyunun metinsel değerlerini incelemek yerine, başka eserlerle kategorize edip büyük anlatılara odaklanan bilimsel çalışmalar üzerinden Türk edebiyat kuramındaki soruna odaklanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Dinçer Sümer, Eski Fotoğraflar, Türk Tiyatrosu, Kimlik Krizi.

## Introduction

In his book, *History of World Theatre* (1986), Özdemir Nutku describes Dinçer Sümer's play *Old Photographs* (1976) as "the story of a prostitute who reminisces about her life through old photographs"<sup>1</sup>. Although such a description can suffice to define a play in a bulky anthology, surprisingly an appraisal of *Old Photographs* is absent from most major critical studies on Turkish drama because only a more detailed analysis can unfold the new concept of fragmented self and nontraditional writing elements within the play. Although Sevtap the prostitute is the antagonist of the play, the men she meets are considered as products of a single unit, and their common identity features indicate emergence of an identity, following a Freudian construction, involving seemingly different but essentially similar traits. Fragmentations and similarities within the character structure trace a crisis of identity which leads to a questioning of a hidden profoundness to identity and social preferences.

Nutku is a pillar in Turkish theatre, and most scholars following his lead have accepted *Old Photographs* as the story of a prostitute. When analyzing a play, such traditional criticism, dominant academic movements, scholars, and social trends are beneficial and enlightening in many aspects. However, these methods have their own limitations such as negligence of certain textual merits or grouping of various literary products which might be similar in character but completely different in textual qualities per se. A peculiar concept of criticism and literary analysis of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Turkish drama has fostered such a propensity in academia as well as publishing world that has aimed to focus on "a bigger picture" rather than textual details. This article analyzes a victim of that tradition, Dinçer Sümer's *Old Photographs* (*Eski Fotoğraflar* 1976). The negligence of textual qualities and relevant elements has induced an impartial understanding of the play and an ineffective method to contemplate textual delicacies. Instead, a rigorous attempt to set forth a narrative history of the play within specific frameworks under the most accepted titles or themes has become a preferable examination method which, in the beginning, was an effective way to establish a critical legacy, but has turned into an overlooking approach that academia and critics should jettison if the true fabric of literary pieces and their contribution to social identity are to be scrutinized and comprehended in a wider sense.

## Old Photographs

Sümer is a realist playwright in general because his other plays (*Gül Satardı Melek Hanım*, *Katip Çıkmazı*, *Maviydi Bisikletim*) explore subjects of poverty,

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1 Özdemir Nutku, *Dünya Tiyatrosu Tarihi*. İstanbul: Mitos Boyut, 1986, p. 563.

unfairness of the society, relationship among family members and neighbors. Neither modern nor postmodern concerns initiate conflicts in his plays. However, characters in his plays are alienated from each other and other members of society as communication and comprehension among them are fragile. Stemming from mostly economic and social reasons, the alienation within *Old Photographs* leads characters to identity crisis. There is little philosophical investigation about economic reasons, but Sümer's method in *Old Photographs* turns this old-fashioned plot into a twisted play that moves through fragmented identities and a psychological re-evaluation, and even de-construction of, the present. In the photographs hung around Sevtap's mirror, figures are pierced through, and they have been taken out of her memories. These people have been removed, but they still occupy her inner psyche, and invisible figures in her subconscious command her life. These absent characters reflect Sevtap's world. Although there are two characters on stage, the presence of others always dominates the actions and opinions of others.

*Old Photographs* is the story of a female character Sevtap whose real name is Sevgi (love in Turkish), but since Sevtap (a person who is adored by others) sounds as a better nickname for her professional nightclub singing career, she changes her name. The audience is informed about her *bildung* through flashbacks inspired by old photographs on her mirror. The play wanders around borderlines which show characters with little coherence and other psychotic defections. The fact that Sümer's play holds analyses of the self, identity, and fixed meanings in a society, even before the surfacing of studies of these concepts in Turkey, makes it more valuable for the emergence of a nontraditional discourse in dramatic texts. The discontinuities in character and plot formation enable shifts in emphasis, rhetoric, and procedure, which eventually turn into interplay between changes and traditions, history and modernism, and the divided layers of Turkish society.

It is a play for two actors, and male characters in the play seem to create one single unit with different expectations from Sevtap, but, in general, Sevtap renders them as one. For her, they are "all the same—dragged from the same gutter!" They are all "glued" to her "belly and hips".<sup>2</sup> The idea of uniting male characters under one body introduces an alienating component in which characters are represented as "the precipitate of variously mutable subject positions engendered within complex networks of power relations and discursive systems" instead of "a stable entity possessing fixed spiritual, mental, or physical qualities".<sup>3</sup> When Sevtap treats each character from her past as a single entity, she turns the audience's attention to refigure the meaning in the text. In contrast

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2 Jayne L. Warner (ed.), *I, Anatolia and Other Plays*. USA: Syracuse UP, 2008, p. 57.

3 Alan Sikes, *Representation and Identity from Versailles to the Present: The Performing Subject*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007, p.3.

to classical renderings, representation, in this regard, becomes impossible to continue, and characters become products of divided cultural interpretation rather than a univocal one. The characters' names are not written in the text; they are referred to as the man and the woman. Although the play starts with a realistic and rationalist plot, characters are based on irrationalities of characters' background stories. Under these circumstances, the formation of self becomes a defensive strategy to protect inner and outer self from the harms of social factors. Although this can be considered as a flaw in the play, this defensive strategy over the formation of characters improves the subversive and poetic vein of the play as it raises a romantic resistance to the brutalities of daily life and the identity that is imposed upon characters.

What makes *Old Photographs* more important is the identity crisis that Sümer portrays through the fragmentation of characters. Just like Sevtap's complaint about men, people do not recognize her as a person. Her transformation into an entity for most people has eradicated her identity since "in complex societies individual identity owes to our being identified by others".<sup>4</sup> Although it might be a revolutionary idea to have a strong female character in the 1970s, the disorientation that is dismissed in this play contains nontraditional elements and represents the psyche of the nation which was stuck between the forces of the cold war. That climate of adversity does not nourish self-hood because a healthy identity concept "requires a modern social environment in which the practice of identification is a common practical accomplishment".<sup>5</sup> Sevtap's denial of her real self has removed her from realities and created a bubble zone which has been contaminated by her alcohol addiction. Her grandiose gratifications come to an end when she delays her arrival at the night club. She suddenly passes away when her boss Veli fires her as she cannot endure the physical and mental burden of her bubble's explosion.

As a different approach to political issues, Sümer does not portray an ideological perspective but a more humane one. His recognition of difficulties in sustaining any form of authentic form presents cracks in a society which harbors fragmented and decentered individuals. Fragmentation reveals itself in different forms. For example, there is a repetitive narrative about immigrating to Germany, and almost all characters are tied to this narrative as a collective sign of discontent. The yearning for immigration to Germany symbolizes a reflection of alienation to people's unresolved problems and the search for a better life as well as a new country. Numan Bey used to live in Germany, and he is back in Turkey. Sümer points at the dilemma that everyone wants to go to Germany, but the ones who come from them are also still looking for something. The result of this desire is a

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4 Elliott, Anthony. *Routledge Handbook of Identity Studies*. New York: Routledge, 2019, p.10.

5 *Ibid*, p. 104.

theoretical liberation from the requirements of being accepted by social norms and traditions which become a burden for many characters. Men around Sevtap, including her lovers, are a product of social expectations and they have become obedient servants of social norms. Anything that remains outside those social norms should be warned, abhorred, and harshly punished for their deviance.

*Old Photographs* is a refusal of traditional tendencies and aims to remove their trappings of strict style and didacticism. The play's construction on the fallibility of truths including the identity of all characters deconstructs the audience's understanding of themselves through the fragmentation of characters, which conceptualizes a paradoxical identity formation. For example, Sevgi's husband, Satılmış, returns from Germany to revenge his brother who had been murdered by their enemies Halilgiller (The Halil family). Sevgi's brother-in-law, Cavit also mentions Halilgiller in the beginning of the play when he seeks a scapegoat for his poverty. Here is the dialogue between Cavit and Sevgi that introduces several people and themes in the beginning:

MAN: ... Someday I'm gonna correct the error.

WOMAN: Error? What error?

MAN: My father's error, *the Halil family's error, Veli Bey's error, Blond Hicran's error, sister Sevtap's error* ... my own error ... your error, your sister's error...

WOMAN: [Seems frightened.] Are you awfully drunk?

MAN: Things went wrong at the core. The root was rotten.

WOMAN: I just don't know what you're talking about.

MAN: It's the same with me, at least for now. I can't figure it out.

WOMAN: OK, then, who are the people you've mentioned? What have they got to do with me, with you, with my sister?

MAN: Let me tell you ... the connection ... *everybody turns into a speck of dust and vanishes into thin air, but then falls into the bottom of the same pitch-dark well.* After that, there's no holding on, no way of making it. (Warner 12-13) (Italics are mine)

All the names Cavit lists are references to other characters who will be introduced later in the play, but neither the audience nor Sevgi knows them yet. For Cavit, they are the culprits, but chronologically it is not possible for him to know them or mention blond Sevtap. This is the first crack of time and characterization in the play that hints an awkward unification of time and place for these characters. Each male character mentions one of these characters or themes at some point in the play and takes part in a narrative that awkwardly connects everyone to a single non-cohesive line.

Sümer portrays the self as a constructed phenomenon and shows us the cracks in characters at certain parts, so that the audience can track imprints created by the needs and expectations of social norms because what starts as a story of a prostitute becomes a display of the fragile existence of the self which is, to some extent, dependent on wider social circumstances. In other words, the play becomes a battleground between the ego/id and superego. The repressed desires of male characters surface when they meet Sevgi; she becomes a catalyzer to unfold instinctive feelings. The inner essence of characters demolishes the social construction of themselves. Furthermore, Sümer points at social forces for these characters' logical disorders because, as it can be tracked in the play, Sevgi is the natural form whereas Sevtap is a social construction. Modes of relationship between people demand a new identity and a certain set of attitudes/skills from everyone. However, the constructed form does not always fulfil the reality of characters as they conflict with the inner self. When the experience of real life is conceptualized, Sevgi becomes a weak form. On the other hand, the limiting characteristic of social pressure stands for political and cultural climate. For example, Sevtap's late husband Satılmış cannot give up the idea of revenging his brother's death as part of his familial traditions. Despite his marriage and work in Germany, in the end he is heavily influenced by his relations with the outside world and he cannot relinquish the blood feud between families. Sevgi's neighbor Bedri suppresses his desire and probable feelings towards her as his socialist virtues dominate his identity. Their conversation in a tea house becomes an appraisal of the virtues of work although Sevgi expects some sort of proposal from him. Through these characters' real intentions and actions, *Old Photographs* demonstrates how social elements have significance in processes of decision-making. The perception that the audience receives is actually a display of social impact on characters. That is why each character emerges as a remnant of a precedent.

Sevtap as an individual becomes a representative for several things, but, from the perspective of Freudian psychoanalysis, her hidden role as a mother is also remembered at the end. Her means are justified in a sense as the audience realizes that she has compromised most things for her daughter's sake. However, the sacred image of Madonna does not earn Sevtap a terminal image before her demise. She wants to give her daughter a chance for a good education and hopes to retire from her questionable career as soon as she saves enough money for a warm home where she can live with her daughter. Although her commitment to her daughter conflicts with what she points earlier in the play as there are several men who want to buy her affection, this point also manifests the delusional side of her character. Sümer restores Sevtap to Sevgi and highlights her virtuous side at the end as he does not hold her guilty of misadventures she had experienced. In other words, *Old Photographs* rejects an essential idea of domestic womanhood and honors the efforts of self-realization. Although Sevtap's happiness depends

on her relationship with several men starting from her father, the play depicts the transformation of Sevtap in her own individual terms of class, nationality, and gender. Her transformation originates from social forces and the mutation of Sevtap from Sevgi is a trajectory of the dilemma that patriarchal and phallogocentric vision supplements as the source of nurturing and essential motherhood. Sevtap's endeavor is a call and "advocacy for work, career, independence, and self-sufficiency that looked askance at the idea of sisterhood, motherhood, and community."<sup>6</sup> Sevtap prefers her career to motherhood because she must. There is no glorification of motherhood and community in this sense. Thus, Sümer follows a method of un-mothering of a woman in a mother-daughter relationship. Although Sevtap turns to her holy mission of nurturing at the end of the play through the phone conversation with her daughter and connects everything to her daughter's wellbeing, the transformation that Sevtap has experienced is a manifest particularly against the female stereotype of the seventies.

Sevtap is a character that is shaped by her environment, but at the end of the play, her phone conversation with her daughter is a testimony to someone who is above Sevtap and Sevgi. Sevtap's daughter functions as a corrector that motivates Sevtap to go on with her career. Sevtap hopes that she will not have to face difficulties due to her education. However, she never tells her profession. For her daughter, she does not diminish the image of an innocent mother. She admits that all her endeavors, whether morally acceptable or not, are all for her. She is Sevtap's moral source. If Sevtap went back to a normal life, that would be because of her daughter. This relationship between Sevtap and daughter is a paradigm that resembles Freud's theory of ego and superego:

Freud's ego is a deep interior, but half-conscious element of the psyche. Against the ego facing the outside world, Freud famously posed the Superego, which is the source of the moral demands of society, mediated in childhood through parental objects. Superego is the judge of the social world, always promising punishment for misbehavior.<sup>6</sup>

Although Sevtap's daughter is not capable of promising punishment for misbehavior, Sevtap's concern is not to shatter the identity that she has created for her daughter. Whenever Sevtap meets with a representative of the Superego, she changes her form and shape just like the actors in different scenes. The transition between the scenes represents the fallacy and slippery nature of identities through characters against sovereign powers of society which represses Sevgi and creates a new identity for her to prevent the world from crushing her real self. Sevgi becomes an alternative self that Sevtap plans to return when the time is ripe. Her daughter, who acts as the corrective figure in Sevtap's life, functions

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<sup>6</sup> Krasner, David, *A History of Modern Drama*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 254.



as a superego that provides moral demands. Sevtap is drawn as an individual in the murky waters of modernizing society that does not value her real identity. Hence, she wanders around like an "id" that does not really care about what people think of her. When Sevtap starts drinking, that becomes a trigger to surface the unconscious that is deep recessed within her primitive instincts.

In a denial of her real self, Sevtap turns into an alcoholic and she starts to live in her bubble. Although Seyit warns her, she tells him her stories. This is a typical defense mechanism for a deformed character to preserve her constructed identity as Freud points out:

"The task [of the ego] is self-preservation. As regards external events, it performs that task by becoming aware of stimuli, by storing up experiences about them (in memory), by avoiding excessively strong stimuli (through flight), by dealing with moderate stimuli (through adaptation) and finally by learning to bring about expedient changes in the external world. As regards internal events, in relation to the id, [the ego] performs that task by gaining control over the demands of the instincts, by deciding which are to be allowed satisfaction, by postponing that satisfaction to times and circumstances favorable in the external world or by suppressing their excitations entirely."<sup>7</sup>

Sevtap has lost her emotional ties with people around her. She is in a mode of flight to survive the external world that forces her to change her identity. Desire and motivation are not her main components; her dreams and failures have become a source to nourish her bubble. Despite all the difficulties she has experienced, her struggle is praise-worthy and her battle with her delusions is a manifest against the patriarchal system that has severely contorted her mind and body.

Sevgi becomes a basis for rethinking the liberating nature and position of women in social life as Sevtap's transformation provides an anti-authoritative position for her character. Her unfinished and constantly changing character according to her surrounding situation evacuates the authoritative discourse and opens her features to interpretation according to changing perceptions of society. Her transformation constitutes a partial feminine liberation for her. She is portrayed as a character whose happiness is dependent on the presence of men in her life. She grows up without a mother and her father is the real source of joy and happiness which she mentions in her dialogues with her husband. He takes her father's position, and she feels happy since she has filled that void with another man. As Sevtap is betrayed or abandoned by every man she feels connected with, she becomes an independent character whose relationship with the

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7 Freud, S. *An Outline of Psych-Analysis*. Translated by James Strachey. New York: W.W. Norton, 1949 [1940], p. 14-15.

opposite sex relies on deception and profit. Her independent self learns through a hard way that she cannot trust anyone else but herself. Her journey tells how her selfhood has been decentralized and destabilized. Her failures with men have been an affirmation of a destructive world which has generated illusionary thoughts to deny reality. Sevtap's memories are her shield against reality, but her nostalgic feelings for her past distort her selfhood.

In addition to the mnemonic fabric of the play, the significance of *Old Photographs* in identifying cultural and social roles of the 1970s Turkish Republic cannot be denied as there is a multitude of characters from various parts of the society and the themes mentioned in the play reveal the dominant issues of that era. Stuck between the Western modernity and the Eastern Islamism, *Old Photographs* highlights an outsider's story as an alternative to other forms of literary appropriations and shifts the focus from economic aspects to the changing social relations and the transformation between ideals and social structure characteristic of a newly emerging capitalist country. Sümer juxtaposes characters', particularly Sevtap's, lives with their ideals; what becomes common in several of them is the feeling of disappointment.

Sümer's play is not revolutionary in terms of employing a new language, but it strives to include many layers of the society. It is not a politically motivated play, but characters from different political camps have echoes of their ideologies on stage. What Sümer unveils through these characters is often a harmony and seldom a chaos of these ideas. The general image that Sümer portrays is not a unified single formulation that aims to offer a grand narrative about the society and the individual. On the contrary, his account of male characters resembles a practice of mimicry. Each story by a different character seems to be a piece of a bigger puzzle, but these characters have added deviation and skepticism toward the formation of that narrative. His portrayal is a realistic depiction of social layers as there are several characters that can be easily considered as a representative of certain classes or social roles. Numan Bey, who offers refuge after her husband's murder, tries to remember his old love through Sevtap. He is the rich guy who would like to engage a woman with the power of his money. Sevtap's neighbor Bedri is a worker, and his unfiltered cigarette has been an emblem for leftists in Turkey for a long while. He is a character of virtue, and he refuses to have an affair with Sevtap because he is engaged. He gives a long lecture to Sevtap about the virtues of working. Seyit, who is an obvious servant of the system, calls for Sevtap to be as dutiful as him and advises her not to annoy their master by keeping him, waiting any longer. However, Sevtap as a veteran worker of the entertainment industry is sick of the system and she is not willing to play the game according to the rules of others. Her boss Veli Bey is the center of society, but Sümer puts him aside and pulls the marginal, one of Veli Bey's employees, to the center as a protagonist. Those who had the power and authority to speak on behalf of

history are now silenced; the oppressed unconscious is freed. Instead, the audience witnesses the ascendancy of a heroin from volatile economic conditions. In this regard, *Old Photographs* is a challenge to authority from the beginning. The erosion of authority has given way to a new character whose class and culture are not considered to be equivalent to others.

*Old Photographs* is a manifestation of marginal characters as well as fragmentations within the unity of a play's structure. It is a farewell to modernist faith in the legitimate ability of correcting every fault at the end as it does not seek a unique revelation as art. It is to this process of creating artificial revelations and focusing on the miserable life of a prostitute that most critics have overlooked. Buried within the means of conventional theater, *Old Photographs* experiments with identity and fixed roles of various people in a society which goes through transformations just like the protagonist. Sevtap's adverse conditions are a result of the people around her, but the individualization within the play connotes a problematic process in which every person is blended in an ambiguous pot which resembles a zone of indeterminacy. This situation undermines a determinist interpretation of a society which imposes everyone a specific role. Sümer rejects this approach and shows how the people have been an indifferent part of a bigger picture, a deconstruction of society into its smaller units. The textual memory Sümer creates is a shattered version in which some of the faces have been cut out like Sevtap's pictures. The melting of individuals and how they are faded into oblivion as the self-maintain its central position. The crumps Sevtap leaves behind in the text lead to the heralding of a century of selfhood.

### **Criticism on *Old Photographs***

Through the national database of dissertations and theses, there were no results for the name Dinçer Sümer. Other databases and eventually Google were checked, but there was nothing other than a couple of reviews and biographical information about Sümer and his plays. However, many actors recite the protagonist Sevtap's famous soliloquys are on YouTube to show their proficiency in the craft. If this were a play deemed to represent Turkish drama in an anthology published by Syracuse University, why would not be more analytical works on it? This question was the inspiration for this article.

This could be due to the credibility of Sümer's career as a playwright. Unlike many playwrights who emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, Sümer held a degree from the drama department of the State Conservatory in Ankara and he worked for the State Theater as an actor and director for four decades. Recipient of many awards, Sümer published four volumes of poems, novels, plays and short stories in addition to working as the chief cultural advisor to Süleyman Demirel, the tenth president of Turkey. It did not make sense why his works went unnoticed

by many scholars. Perhaps *Old Photographs* was his only successful play; but there is a myriad of playwrights who had success over a play and never managed to reach the same success level afterwards. Can John Osborne be dismissed for not writing another *Look Back in Anger*?

As a last resort, Turkish books which cannot be accessed on the Internet were checked. The first source was Özdemir Nutku's *Dünya Tiyatrosu Tarihi (History of World Theatre: 1986)*. Nutku includes Sümer and his plays under the subheading of plays focusing on domestic affairs. Here is his analysis of Sümer and his place in dramatic world:

... Sümer's (1938) plays on domestic affairs are under the influence of atmosphere. His *Katip Çıkmazı* (1971) is about the emotional affairs of people living in the suburbs of a city. ... Sümer's *Old Photographs* (1976) depicts the story of a prostitute who remembers her life through old photographs. The reasons for her choosing such a life are also discussed in the play. (373)

Nutku's brief definition is still understandable for the sake of brevity and clearness, but emerging scholars looking for the examples of nontraditional writing in Turkish playwriting will clearly not be able to find the information in his book. If an emerging researcher would like to save time by going through such sources, he/she will eventually ignore *Old Photographs'* textual merits. If it is reduced to the story of a prostitute, the scope of the play also seems really limited. Besides, Nutku is a particularly important figure in Turkish theater and his name is often a source of credibility.

Next source was from Sevda Şener who devotes several pages for Sümer's plays in her book *Gelişim Sürecinde Türk Tiyatrosu (Turkish Theater in the Process of Development, 2003)*. Şener explains how his plays are important in Turkish dramatic history and analyzes them in detail. Explaining Sümer's writing techniques in *Old Photographs*, Şener also focuses on melodramatic qualities of the plays and highlights feminist qualities. Şener has often employed formalist methods to analyze plays and her approach to encode the entire structure through details is manifest for *Old Photographs*:

The playwright has woven his play with inner and outer conflicts. Both Sevtap and the men she met are *fragmented* within because of the cul-de-sacs they experienced. ... Sevtap's prominent feature is that she tries to protect her honor and dignity although she has already accepted the defeat. Her harmonious, soft, and fragile features are clearly in conflict with powerful, passionate, and rebellious character. ... At the center of this drama is a sick, tired, and miserable woman. Overall, this drama reflects the miserable reality of all humanity. (Translation and emphasis mine 194)

Şener clearly gives important hints about Sümer's achievements in *Old Photographs* as she mentions the fragmented condition of characters and feminist values of Sevtap's position. Despite being written as Şener's preface to Sümer's plays in 1997, this introductory piece brings more light on Sümer's abilities and techniques in *Old Photographs*.

The problem that this paper attempts to identify starts with the scarcity of contemporary research on *Old Photographs* and lack of close readings within them. For example, a recent article on plays consisting of mainly two characters analyzes *Old Photographs* together with five other plays. Written by Abide Doğan and Sıdıka Gökçelik, their 2004 article gives an overall structure of plays that features two characters. Their article is based on Sevdâ Şener's writings, which constitute the backbone of their theoretical explanation. Unfortunately, the article ignores the implications of nontraditional writing techniques and instead focuses on types of settings and conflicts often used in such plays. However, the impact of bundling up several similar things into the same category can be observed in this article. Analyzing different plays together just because they all have two characters creates an ambiguous comparison. The rest of the article gives summaries of the plays in detail. A long and ineffective account of *Old Photographs*' plot focuses on the oppression Sevgi suffers from, but the article ignores other literary techniques of the play. This excerpt is taken from the conclusion of the article:

The writer has evaluated several characters from a spiritual aspect in a play that takes place in three-four hours. Each of these characters reflects a problem in society. The oppression of individuals created by society and how they can affect them has been evaluated. It has been proved again that the economic system plays a key role in social problems.<sup>8</sup>

Without going into any details, these comments can be written for any play. A reductionist understanding that reduces everything to economics ignores the complex and fragmented fabric of the play. When interpreted as a reflection of economic problems, the characters in the play lose their vibrancy and they become a symbolic figure on stage. This might be the case for each character, but then the article needs to offer further evidence of such connections. Clearly, these writers have neglected Şener's point on fragmentation. In their article there is no singular theme or value that holds this play together and the bothersome point is that most scholars do not challenge or contest this unfair "equation" formulated for *Old Photographs* because this requires a destabilization of the traditional form of modern drama criticism. For example, Doğan and Gökçelik claim that each character reflects a problem. There is truth in this connection between the

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<sup>8</sup> Abide Doğan ve Sıdıka Gökçelik, "Türk Tiyatrosunda İki Kişilik Oyunlar Üzerine Bir Değerlendirme (1980-2000)," *Bilig*, 2004, c. 31, p. 67.

characters and their problems. However, Sevtap's neighbor, Bedri, is a sarcastic portrayal of a socialist worker from the 1970s. Sümer criticizes socialist realist writers through Bedri's naivety and idealism. Categorizing conflicts in a play in order to find similarities and contrasts with other plays leads scholars to neglect subversive virtues hidden between the lines.

Arzu Özyön, in her doctoral thesis called "The Reflections of Absurd Theater on Turkish Theater after 1970" (2017), uses Nutku's explanation to describe Sümer's plays, and *Old Photographs* gets the credit of being just a story of a prostitute. She points out that this play together with *Sacide* and *Besleme* by Ülker Koksall brings out the topic of women in plays.<sup>9</sup> Similar to Doğan and Gökçelik's categorization, Özyön also compiles *Old Photographs* under the category of woman plays. However, denigrating *Old Photographs* as a women play cannot value the play's other structural and lingual qualities as it is intended from the beginning to focus on specific sides. Although Özyön spared a great amount of space for playwrights who were not really related to absurd theater, a more careful analysis on Sümer's texts could have provided more guidance. Özyön, like other scholars, chooses the worn path and focuses on certain plays which have already been analyzed under the heading of absurd. There is clearly a common acceptance of the history of Turkish drama as well as literature that most academicians do not feel welcome to venture away from.

After the research period for this article, a master's thesis on Sümer's life and works was finally published in the database of Turkish High Education Council. With a similar gap in textual analysis of Sümer's plays, Halil Biçerik provides information on the playwright and his works. His keywords for his thesis hint about his work. Biçerik has chosen *Dinçer Sümer, theater, woman, love* and *İzmir*. Keywords can be crucial in identifying main points of a work as our century has seen an enormous inflation of written texts. Biçerik's thesis does not really reflect the thematic qualities of his plays as his thesis focus on summaries based on other scholars' reviews. He summarizes *Old Photographs* as a play that shows the position of Turkish women in society.

There might be varied reasons for the reluctance to go over texts whose literary value has already been determined by prominent scholars. First, it is easy and practical to follow the footsteps of precedents for producing academic texts, but if literary critics had all the same tendency towards the history of writing today, we would not have known writers such as Kate Chopin, Aphra Behn, Suat Derviş and many other writers whose writing was not appealing or interesting enough to their audience at the time of publication or writing. Digging, in this respect, is useful for literature and critical theory. Texts that were not deemed good or

<sup>9</sup> Arzu Özyön, "Absürt Tiyatro'nun 1970 Sonrası Tiyatromuza Yansımaları", Doctoral Dissertation, Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi, 2017, p. 219.

complicated enough before can reveal new worlds for others and can build bridges between yesterday and today. New revelations from old plays such as the ones in *Old Photographs* enrich our perception of the past, the present and the future. Curiosity is a key concept that each academicians should enforce despite disadvantages and difficulties.

Overall, these works by emerging scholars reveal a pattern of a distinct approach towards *Old Photographs* which require a deeper analysis and more comprehensive criticism. Turkish literary criticism depends on historical pillars which have been grounded on solid surface and this solid surface may sometimes prevent pristine flowers under the soil from blooming. New criticism and analysis are supported by different parties in academy and publishing world in Turkey; however, mainstream approach to traditional literary theory remains conservative to literary and cultural advances around the world. There are several reasons for this, such as the lack of publications in different languages, educational scarcity for novel approaches in literature and theater departments and the conservative fabric of Turkish society for this reluctance to re-evaluate most Turkish cultural and literary texts. Unfortunately, emerging scholars' reaction to *Old Photographs* can be considered as emblematic of how traditional criticism and aesthetics are bizarrely (mis)aligned with contemporary criticism theories.

All systems beget a hierarchy and a system of rules that apply to everyone. This is how a canon can be formed, but unfortunately Turkish drama lacks voices to stand against this canon and interpret texts from different perspectives because looking back from the twenty-first century, it is easier to track the temporal and cultural shift that took a significant term during the times that *Old Photographs* described candidly. Most scholars, like Şener and Nutku, did not have this luxury in the 1980s because it was too contemporary and sudden for most texts that need to be discovered and confronted, but theatre historians and literary analysts should be more vigilant. If scholars would like to write something about the plays of the 1960s, they would naturally turn to Özdemir Nutku's and Sevda Şener's books as introductory material to draw a roadmap and form a methodology. Both scholars greatly contributed to the field of drama in Turkey. However, I object to solely relying on these critical works which could not address all the textual merits. Emerging researchers and writers should be enthusiastic to go the extra mile in order to find the hidden gems in Turkish literary history, which might be far richer than we think.

### Conclusion

In the genre of Turkish literary analysis works are usually categorized under an umbrella concept, such as domestic plays, plays for two characters or coup plays, and as a result certain writers tend to disappear before ever reaching to public

domain unless they have produced works that fall in either of those categories. This might be true everywhere around the world. Market policies usually shape a writer's destiny, but scholars should be more vigilant in tracking literary merit rather than following trends. There is no consensus on what criticism should include, but the more scholars approach texts from various points, the more those texts will be comprehended. There are no *proper* interpretations or readings. The core of critical legacies comes from the need to review certain texts under the guidance of a new understanding. That is the reason scholars stopped viewing a text as an autonomous, self-sufficient, and enclosed verbal entity because the complex network of meanings in a text requires more comprehensive referential claims.

The fractures and unification of narratives in *Old Photographs* manifest an opposition to conventional structure of characters and plot and aim to re-define art's relation to real life and refuse the fixity and formula of traditional drama. Sümer "seek(s) strategies of mimesis to disclose these elusive realities without reifying them and so making them seem, falsely, to be merely novel iterations of the same old familiar truths and eternal verities."<sup>10</sup> True reality becomes a part of fictional scaffolding and rather than being taken for granted, the reality which is available to readers becomes transitory and fugitive.

On one side, *Sevta* represents the de-legitimation and de-differentiation on stage. Her emergence as a protagonist has proved that authority and legitimacy has been switched in favor of those who hitherto did not have a chance to raise their voices. The spread and elimination of authority and legitimacy from those who previously occupied has concentrated on marginal characters. Such a chaotic layering of social structures eroded cultural levels. Societal roles to determine norms have been taken from patriarchal forces and instead turned to a woman whose story equalized her to all other unbridgeable members of society. This play is clearly a result of the proliferation of variants in a developing and rapidly changing nation. Change has directed new attitudes toward view of points, and particular areas had to be reconsidered. The villains of yesterday have become today's protagonists whose pitiable stories have become a real concern for society. By disturbing grand narratives and focusing on marginal people's local stories, *Old Photographs* belongs to a time ahead of her days and deserves more textual and dramaturgical scrutiny.

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<sup>10</sup> Dowden, Stephen D., *Modernism and Mimesis*. Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 2.



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