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Representations of religion in the entertainment media: A comparison of the TV series Shtisel in Israel and Ömer in Türkiye

Eğlence medyasında din temsilleri: İsrail'deki Shtisel ve Türkiye'deki Ömer televizyon dizilerinin karşılaştırması

Ayşenur KILIÇ[1]

[1]Asst. Prof., Social Sciences University of Ankara, Faculty of Political Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye

ORCID: A.K. 0000-0001-9001-389X

Corresponding author/Sorumlu yazar:
Ayşenur Kılıç,
Social Sciences University of Ankara, Faculty of Political Sciences, Ankara, Türkiye
E-mail/E-posta: aysenur.kilic@asbu.edu.tr

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Abstract

This research focuses on two cases from the Global South -the Israeli series *Shtisel* and its Turkish scripted format adaptation *Ömer*- to revisit the theoretical debates on the relations between entertainment media, politics, and society by employing Curran's radical democratic approach. Both series illustrate a recently popular genre: Pious people's bemusement with modern/secular everyday life. Analyzing TV format adaptations in Türkiye is further significant because the imported format adaptations remain relatively less studied. Four main narratives come into prominence via the narrative analysis: i) the use of technology, ii) the skepticism towards the outside world in *Ömer*, iii) gender narratives, and iv) politicization/depoliticization of representations of religion. *Shtisel* represents religion without reflecting current socio-political conflicts, *Ömer* reflects religion as a site of contestation and polarization of differing identities by reproducing political conflicts from everyday life into fiction. Curran's framework explains *Ömer* sufficiently but is limited in helping understand *Shtisel* unless the Israeli case's transnational political-economic context is considered. Finally, to comprehend multilayered, dynamic, and sui generis cultural dimensions for each case in the Global South -which is not a homogenous whole- further theoretical inquiry on local, cultural and intertextual characteristics of scripted format adaptations in individual cases is needed.

Keywords: Scripted format adaptation, James Curran, Türkiye, Israel, narrative analysis

Öz

Bu araştırma, Küresel Güney'den iki örneğe -İsrail dizisi *Shtisel* ile onun Türkiye'deki format adaptasyonu olan *Ömer*- odaklanarak eğlence medyası, politika ve toplum arasındaki ilişkiler hakkındaki teorik tartışmaları, Curran'ın radikal demokrasi

alternatif yaklaşımı ile ele almayı amaçlamaktadır. İncelenen iki dizi de her iki ülkede son zamanlarda popülerleşen bir türü temsil etmesi açısından önemlidir: Dindar insanların modern/seküler günlük yaşamdaki kafa karışıklığını veya dindar-seküler hayat tarzları karşılaştırmasını temsil eden diziler. Türkiye'deki format uyarlamalarını incelemek ayrıyeten önem teşkil etmektedir, çünkü ithal format uyarlamaları Türk dizileri hakkındaki literatürde görece daha az incelenmiştir. Çalışmadaki anlatı analizi sonucunda dört ana anlatı öne çıkmaktadır: i) teknoloji kullanımı, ii) *Ömer*'de dış dünyaya duyulan şüphe, iii) toplumsal cinsiyet anlatıları ve iv) her iki dizideki din temsillerinde, *Ömer*'de siyasallaşma ve *Shtisel*'de siyasallaşmadan arındırma (depolitizasyon) anlatıları. Radikal demokrasi çerçevesi *Ömer*'i yeterince açıklamakta iken, İsrail örneğindeki ulusaşırı siyasi-ekonomik bağlam dikkate alınmadıkça *Shtisel*'i anlamada sınırlı kalmaktadır. Son olarak, homojen bir bütün olmayan Küresel Güney'deki çok katmanlı, dinamik ve kendine has boyutları olabilen her bir vakayı anlayabilmek için her ülke örneğindeki format adaptasyonuna ait yerel, kültürel ve metinlerarası özellikler hakkında daha fazla teorik incelemeye ihtiyaç olduğu görülmektedir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Format adaptasyonu, James Curran, Türkiye, İsrail, anlatı analizi

Introduction

Touring the streets of Casablanca and talking with the local people in 2010, the author of this article was surprised that a considerable number of people from different age groups were mentioning 'Muhannad' or 'if she met Muhannad in person,' etc. when they learned that the author was from Türkiye. Eventually, she would realize that Muhannad was the famous actor Kıvanç Tatlıtuğ's character's name in the exported Turkish TV series, titled *Nour* in the adapted format, and *Gümüş* (2005-2007) originally.[1] In the years since, the Turkish drama sector has enhanced drastically and globally, and it has been a main program exporter globally since 2000s (Algan & Kaptan, 2023, p. 325; Gül, 2021, p. 20; Öztürkmen, 2022). Türkiye's rise as a cultural and economic player in the entertainment industry has already garnered considerable academic interest.

The extant scholarly works on Türkiye's global export of TV series have examined various aspects such as international and transnational soft power construction, the challenges and success of Turkish drama industry, transnational media flows, viewership characteristics, and geopolitical elements (Kaptan & Algan, 2020; Berg, 2023; Gül, 2021; Wagner & Kraidy, 2023). This article, however, zooms in on a relatively less studied dimension of Turkish dramas with a comparative analysis: the scripted format adaptations in the mainstream media in Türkiye. Despite the recent rise (Kesirli Unur, 2021; Kesirli Unur, 2020; Kesirli Unur, 2015; Behlil, 2021), studies on TV format adaptations in the Turkish case still remain relatively underrepresented compared to the academic interest in TV format adaptations in global markets (Moran, 2009; Chalaby 2016; Oren & Shahaf, 2012). The article examines the representations of the popular Israeli series *Shtisel* and its Turkish scripted TV format adaptation *Ömer* comparatively through narrative analysis to explore whether mapping and interpreting the political/ideological meanings embedded in TV dramas can be explained with the radical democratic view of entertainment and fiction (Curran, 2005). The author draws upon James Curran's (2005) critique of classical liberals for their oversight of the ways media intersects with broader societal divisions. By positing that fiction is neither mere fantasy nor sheer distraction but rather a reflection of the society it portrays, this article adopts Curran's approach to test because according to Curran's view, the classical liberal and orthodox Marxist perspectives do not effectively address the entertainment media (see: Table 1). Therefore, *Ömer* and *Shtisel* are examined within this framework to assess whether -compared to classical liberal and old-style Marxist views- Curran's radical democratic perspective

provides a better explanation for understanding TV dramas' representations of social realities and debates in the Global South.

Shtisel (2013) initially appeared as a TV drama on Channel 2 in Israel, and in its third season in 2018, its streaming rights were sold to *Netflix*. It narrates an ultra-Orthodox Haredim community, an old yeshiva teacher and widower Rabbi Shulem Shtisel, and his confused artistic son Akiva who live in Mea Shearim[2]. The show's success is attributed to its representation of strong women (Weinbaum, 2020, p. 1). The show centers on Shtisel family members' bemusement between ascetic religious way of life and modern lifestyles. It is not limited to religion-oriented topics, but it narrates themes from everyday life such as gender roles, education, marriage, child rearing, romantic relations, rituals, and so on. Overall, the family and their social relations construct the base narrative.

The background context of Israeli entertainment media provides important details on why *Shtisel* is an important case to study. This drama is not the first of its kind. *A Touch Away* (2007), *Srugim* (2008), and *Jerusalem Mix* (2004) can also be listed as similarly thematized and popular shows in Israel that can be included in this 'religious genre.' Starting in 1999, the religious genre series started to pop up on Israeli television (Peleg, 2015b). Although, like in Türkiye, the 1990s were the years of a sudden transition to private broadcasting in Israel, this transition and market forces alone cannot explain the appearance of series with the focal points of secular-religious division. During the coding phase of this article, an important question came to the fore: why does *Shtisel* not reflect current political events at all? As discussed below, the religion-oriented TV series in Israel cover different Jewish communities such as Haredim, Ashkenazim, Mizrahim, Sephardim, etc. without underlining the differences among them, but by representing them as 'harmonious colors of the same cultural and political Israeli nation.' The secular-religious divergence is presented as a source of consonance, not conflict, in these series.

Understanding the predecessor dramas and political-economic context in Israel is significant to interpreting *Shtisel*'s master narrative. Previous studies (Talmon, 2013; Peleg, 2015; Peleg, 2015b; Dardashti, 2015) have analyzed how the American-based AVI CHAI Foundation (AC) has financed these dramas as a socio-political project[3] to create a collective Israeli identity and an awareness and discourse about this identity. *Shtisel* is also a part of this project and is supported by this foundation (Peleg, 2015, p. 117; Dardashti, 2015, p. 77-78). The relationship between this foundation and the

dramas is not limited to financial support but involves the scriptwriting processes of these shows (Dardashti, 2015, p. 87; Talmon, 2013, p. 63).

Similarly, in the Turkish context in the last decade, a religious genre[4] has arrived. Compatible with the incumbent party rhetoric and policies of the 2010s and 2020s, series centering on conservative family-oriented characters proliferated (Uğur Tanrıöver, 2022). Similarly, in the post-2010s, a new historical narrative -neo-Ottomanism- appeared in multiple series (Çevik, 2019 as cited in Uğur Tanrıöver, 2022, p. 22). Producers and the Turkish audience have shown an increased interest in this religious genre such as *Kızılcık Şerbeti* (One Love, 2022), and *Kızıl Goncalar* (Red Buds, 2023). *Ömer* also belongs to this genre, but its complex narrative as a format adaptation from a drama on ultra-Orthodox Jews makes it further interesting to examine. Not only narrative-wise but format adaptation dramas bring another layer in terms of complex web of the transnational entertainment industry. On the other hand, examining these series simply via the discourse of secular-religious dichotomy would be misleading. Rather, 'how everyday life is represented, and which values and norms come to the fore' can provide researchers with a much more accurate socio-political, cultural, and theoretical reading.

In an interview with him (Vivarelli, 2023), the owner of the OGM company -the producer of *Ömer*- Onur Güvenatam provides some clues about how and why *Ömer* drags fault lines and emotions of Turkish society into the narratives of the drama:

> In my opinion, as a Turkish content creator, if you look at the ratings, we are used to conservative shows. We are always trying to create within that conservative mindset, and this also adds to the show's potential. When you are making shows for the streamers, yes, you do feel like you can be more edgy, more controversial. And when it was forbidden, we thought that this was very appealing, but when the streamers said, "OK, do whatever you want," we found out that, no, our talent is creating conservative stuff. We are much better at creating those types of stories.

The following parts will respectively cover Curran's radical democratic approach as the theoretical framework, the methodological details of the study, the findings of narrative analysis, and the concluding remarks of the research. As stated at the beginning, the importance of this research is multifaceted. First, it examines scripted TV format adaptations an understudied dimension of Turkish dramas; second, it tests the radical democratic theoretical framework on two cases from the Global South; third, it revisits

discussions on the function of entertainment media in politics; fourth, it tests whether or not Curran's radical democratic approach can offer an alternative but complementary perspective to the two already existing significant theoretical views in interpreting scripted format adaptations: "intertextuality" (Kesirli Unur, 2020; Kesirli Unur, 2015) and "intermediality" (Öztürkmen, 2022, pp. 133-163), and fifth, by comparing the narrative of the original series with that of the scripted format adaptation, it attempts to understand what kind of societal differences/similarities they represent in their narratives. The final importance of this study underlies in its examination of traditional TV series, not the digital platforms (*Shtisel* was sold to *Netflix* later) as a crucial point for the Turkish case, in which traditional TV viewing is still a strong cultural element (Vitrinel, Kaptan & Algan, 2022, p. 6).

Does fiction reflect what you are? Radical democratic approach to entertainment

In elucidating the interaction between the public sphere and media, the normative or idealized roles assigned to media are primarily influenced by liberal perspectives rooted in the well-known 'fourth estate' theory. A second principal theoretical approach, originating from the Marxist tradition, also positions media normatively but interprets its function through the lens of dominant political power relations. Despite these two prevailing approaches, the public sphere is conceptualized differently. Consequently, the ideal or normative role of media within various political regimes is not uniformly interpreted across different theoretical traditions. These roles, whether derived from liberal or Marxist traditions, are predominantly attributed to a focus on news media, leaving entertainment media largely sidelined.

With Curran's perspective, however, this article brings similar discussions to entertainment. Due to the normative or ideal roles attributed to media by the liberal perspective, entertainment has been evaluated generally as "a separate category unrelated to the political role of the media" (Curran, 2005, p. 33) or any political content or information. To the traditional liberal view, entertainment is neither a part of rational-critical debate nor a part of the flow of information between government and the governed. Instead, the classical liberal view sees entertainment in three ways: as a diversion from media's democratic functioning, as ignoring the existence of entertainment in the political sphere and denial of its political role, and finally, as maximization of the consumer gratification (Curran, 2005, pp. 32-33; Curran, 2010: pp. 69-70).

Quite contrary to the liberal stand, the radical approach does not situate entertainment media just within the confines of a "state-oriented definition of politics," but includes various processes of everyday life including "the nature of social relations between men and women, parents and children, young and old, the ethnic majority and minorities." Entertainment might also function in both ways: either by fostering "empathetic insights between different sections of society and strengthens bonds of social association" or conversely, by stimulating "misunderstanding and antagonism through the repetition of stereotypes that provide a focus for displaced fears" in the given society (Curran, 2005, p. 33). Comparing the narratives of two versions of the series (*Shtisel*, and *Ömer*) is important; even though the main plots of both scenarios appear similar, the society-oriented everyday life details from both versions notably differ.

The points above bring us to Curran's (2005, p. 28) argument that via the entertainment media, "society communes with itself" according to the radical democratic framework. The traditional liberal view equates the public sphere with the political sphere, and thus, defining the roles of media vis-à-vis government. The radical democratic approach rejects the traditional separation between private and public spheres. It argues that the mediating role of the media extends to all areas where power is exercised over others, encompassing both the workplace and home. The influence wielded by the media is not only defined by its impact on government actions but also by its ability to affect "adjustments in social norms and interpersonal relationships" (Curran, 2005, p. 32). Then not only government-related news but also media fiction and entertainment can also provide ways of "mapping and interpreting the society" (Curran, 2005, p. 33).

The radical democratic approach, as Curran puts it, is thus distinct from the Marxist viewpoints on entertainment. While the old-style Marxist theory of media considers the media as the disguised mode of "bourgeois domination" and the public sphere as "a chimera" (Curran, 2005, p. 36), radical democrats render a relatively autonomous place for journalists vis-à-vis the government.

Table 1. Alternative theoretical perspectives on media

	Liberal	Marxist critique	Communist	Radical democratic
Public sphere	Public space	Class domination	-	Public arena of contest
Political role of media	Check on government	Agency of class control	Further societal objectives	Representation/counterpoise
Media system	Free market	Capitalist	Public ownership	Controlled market
Journalistic norm	Disinterested	Subaltern	Didactic	Adversarial
Entertainment	Distraction/ gratification	Opiate	Enlightenment	**Society communing with itself**

Source: (Curran, 2005, p. 28)

As Table 1 illustrates, except for the radical democratic one, there are three responses to the democratic meaning of media entertainment that Curran (2011, p. 63) finds inadequate. The first one -as claimed by the classical liberals- sees entertainment as a diversion from the 'serious' democratic role of the media. To Curran, this assessment ignores the political meaning of entertainment. The second -distinguishing entertainment as a separate category from public affairs coverage- is also criticized as methodologically problematic in understanding the contemporary media environment since it reflects the late 19th c. and early 20th c. press-oriented explanations of the American academic community. The third response - "to point to a cross-over between public affairs coverage and entertainment"- is also limited by focusing solely on the segment of media content that explicitly combines entertainment and politics.

Overall, to Curran (2010, p. 70), viewing entertainment as detached from politics or the democratic role of the media is no longer viable. It is rather involved with democratic life in four key ways: values, identities, cognitions, and norms. First, entertainment creates a space for exploring and debating social values and norms that are central to current political debates. Second, it helps in defining and reshaping social identity, closely linked to self-interest. Third, it offers alternative frameworks of understanding that shape public debate. Finally, it provides a means to assess, strengthen, weaken, and revise public norms, which are crucial to self-governance (Curran, 2011, p. 63, 75; Curran, 2010).

Aim and methodology

By focusing on two cases of TV series from the Global South, the Israeli series *Shtisel* and its Turkish scripted format adaptation *Ömer*, this research aims to understand and revisit the theoretical debates on the relations between entertainment media, politics, and society. Instead of the classical liberal perspective's dismissal of entertainment

media, this article rather uses James Curran's radical democratic approach to test whether Curran's approach can sufficiently explain these two cases from the Global South, and if not, explore the reasons for this limitation. In Curran's approach, viewing entertainment as detached from politics or the democratic role of the media is no longer viable. It is rather involved with democratic life in four main ways: values, identities, cognitions, and norms. The comparative narrative analysis of the two series attempts to examine these interactions between entertainment, politics, and society as well as the narrated contents of two series. This comparison allows to observe the differing representations of everyday life when TV series are studied as "narrative ecosystems" (Rocchi & Pescatore, 2022).

Aim

By selecting two cases from the Global South, this research adopts two main aims: first, contributing to the comparative literature on Turkish *dizi*s and their less studied dimension, scripted format adaptations, by focusing on narrative similarities as well as differences; and second, questioning whether a western theoretical paradigm of Curran's radical democratic approach is an explanative framework vis-à-vis the limited perspectives of classical liberal and orthodox Marxist views of entertainment media. This inquiry is important to explore the embedded social, political and ideological meanings in fiction, and to understand the local differences as well as societal divisions in their narratives. In the following section, the reasons for methodological selections, and the techniques used in the research will be clarified.

Methodology

In this research, a qualitative and inductive approach to narrative analysis is adopted to have an exploratory view and to see if there are any patterns in the data. The narrative analysis is applied via a thematic content analysis technique in which the author used a posteriori codes after a pilot watching. During the pilot watching, prominent ideas, recurring ideas/words/attitudes as well as repeating/differing/common themes in both dramas were noted. As a result, the codes (Table 2) were specified. The core aspect of both series is the religious people's bemusement and complex relations with modern life. Regarding the research question and this core aspect, sub-themes that might relate to the religion-modernity-everyday life triangle were assigned. Once the codes were determined, the corresponding dialogue or phrase from the plot was noted. Besides

the codes, the author also coded what sort of attitudes and scenes the dialogue or the actor is laden with.

All episodes of both series were examined in the research that makes approximately 1650 minutes of videos of *Shtisel* (three seasons/ 33 episodes/ 50 minutes average per episode) and 8100 minutes of videos of *Ömer* (two seasons/54 episodes/150 minutes average per episode). Approximately 9750-minute-long videos were examined in total. Turkish dramas are famous for their extremely lengthy episodes, which appears to be a limitation in the research since a 3-hour-long episode would naturally create a burden of coded text in comparison to a 50-minute episode. To overcome any potential problem of excessive coding for *Ömer*, the author chose to consider examining all seasons of both series instead of episode-sampling from each. Therefore, the author could trace the differing sequences and video lengths of narrated events between the original drama and its scripted format adaptation and pursue the differences in the narratives for the same plot that was broadcast in two non-sequential episodes of each drama. And while *Shtisel* lasted three seasons, *Ömer* continued for two seasons with a complex narrative flow from three seasons of *Shtisel*. That is why the flow of events were not in a similar sequence in both.

Due to the multiple layers of narratives, this research had two key methodological questions to understand: How was the story told in *Ömer* and *Shtisel* separately? And "Why was the story told that way?" (Kohler Riessman, 1993, p. 2). This article delves into the first question by conducting narrative analysis, and the second one via the secondary literature. The difficulty in conducting narrative analysis is not only because of the complex layers of narratives but also "systematically interpreting [the] interpretations" (Kohler Riessman, 1993, p. 5).

Narrative analysis is a suitable approach for this research. Since an adaptation drama and the original one are examined, it creates multi-layered narratives in which there is the first narrative in the original drama, *Shtisel* (which represents the Israeli context), and the second narrative is formed via the scripted format adaptation *Ömer* based on *Shtisel,* yet the adaptation represents a different context in terms of politics, culture, and religion. Despite *Ömer* being an adaptation, the sequence and content of plots are not the same with *Shtisel*, which adds another layer to the general narrative in tracing the plots, narrative flows, and discourses.

This research uses narratives not only for pinpointing discursive details but also to trace if there are representations of similarities in the dramas with the real politico-cultural life of the represented societies. If yes, 'whether they are represented similarly in the fictional narratives' happened to be an important inquiry for this research. At this point, the author also borrows two dimensions from the intermedia agenda-setting theory: whether there are transfer of issues and/or attitudes from the original drama into the adaptation. If the salient issues and attitudes are not the same, what can be the explanative factors? Even though these two (issue-transfer and attitude-transfer) were not coded as two separate themes, these two remained as a background criterion while coding the other themes and were noted properly under the relevant code.

A narrative theorist, Seymour Chatman, argued that "characters in TV and the plot are equally important, and thus, interpreting the character is valid and important as the interpretation of the theme, plot, or some other narrative elements in TV programs" (Porter, et. al., 2002, p. 24). During coding in this research, the author particularly considered character development. For example, while examining Ömer (the protagonist in *Ömer*)[5], he was continuously compared with the character, Akiva (protagonist in *Shtisel*) in terms of discourses, characteristic features, and the way the character was developed through episodes.

The codes in the narrative analysis are appointed to understand the general narrative of religious people's confusion and conflicts in modern everyday life. Table 2 lists the main and sub-codes and their short conceptualizations.

Table 2. The main and sub-codes of the analysis

Codes	Description	Sub-codes (if any)	Explanation (if necessary)
The use of technology and any sort of medium	Using or not using technology or any technology-relevant medium. (Not only using but talking about usage of technology is also included in this code.)		Any sort of technology usage-related plots, scenes, dialogues, behaviors are coded. Exemplary keywords: technology, vehicle, computer, car, driving, TV, radio, newspapers, phone, the Internet.

Gender-related issues	• How is motherhood defined? • How is femininity defined? • How is masculinity defined? • What kind of gender roles are attributed to women and men? • Are there any educational differences/similarities for girls and boys? • Are women and men representations similar for the corresponding characters in two dramas?	• female-male interaction • masculinity • femininity • motherhood • marriage • gender-based education (for boys and for girls)	
Social and family relations	social relations with friends, family, neighbors, and relatives		
Representation of religion and religion-related themes	Any discussion related to religion is coded accordingly with sub-codes.	• religion-politics interactions • religion-history debates • religious behaviors, practices, and clothing • religion in everyday life	
Everyday life practices	any sort of everyday life practices that appear to be relevant with modern lifestyle		Inconsistencies, hesitancies, dichotomies and modernity-related problems (between religious practices/thinking with modern life)
Transfer of issues or attributes from *Shtisel* to *Ömer*	Transfer of issues or attributes: a) from *Shtisel* to *Ömer,* b) from real-life (reality) to episodes (fiction)		
Politics-fiction interaction	Are the real-life socio-political issues represented in the fiction? If yes, how? Which political events do/not the series refer to? To what extent, these representations are compatible with the current political ideological atmosphere?		
Descriptions of the characters	Describe the character's features and compare/contrast with the corresponding character in the original/adaptation.		

Findings

Four main narratives -the use of technology; intrigue, skepticism and distrust; emancipation of women vs. pseudo-feminist narrative; and politicized and depoliticized narratives in the representations of everyday life and religion- come to the fore as a result of the data analysis in the two series in differing ways. Each of the subtitles below represents these salient narratives.

The use of technology

In *Shtisel*, avoiding the use of technology in Haredim appears to be interpreted as withdrawal from worldly pleasures. Not only the use of technology but also other listening to music, painting, singing, and such activities are interpreted as worldly activities that might keep the person away from the yeshiva doctrine. All the examples about worldly pleasures and their interpretations by different characters illustrate the drama's attitude towards the religion-modernity dichotomy: modernity is not completely incompatible with a religious lifestyle.

Those who deal with the issues found improper according to the ultra-Orthodox Jewish tradition (such as driving, having a car, watching TV, etc.) are called "rebel" in *Shtisel* (S2, E5)[6]. The issue of driving, as a case in point, is not welcomed in the Haredi community either for men or women. However, despite the use of 'rebel' by Rabbi Shulem, for instance, the dominant attitude in *Shtisel* is finding a mid-way between traditional and modern life. For example, even if Lippe (the son-in-law of Rabbi Shulem, husband of Giti) was called a rebel because of his driving and having a car, Giti (the daughter of Shulem) could marry him; Tovi (the daughter-in-law of Shulem, wife of Zvi Arye) could drive despite some opposition from her husband at first. Akiva listened to English songs on the radio while painting (S1, E7). Similarly, Rabbi Shulem listened to a comedy group called 'Gashash Trio' CD at Torah School and enjoyed it (S2, E10). Another example is that Lippe continued to use his smartphone and the Internet for fun, business, and communication despite his wife Giti's critiques (S1, E12).

Ömer is similar in terms of withdrawal from technology. For example, the pious (Muslim) Ademoğlu family members do not use smartphones. When it is found out that the younger members -such as Tahir's teenage son and daughter- use smartphones without their father's permission, he destroys their phones. As another case of technology use, like *Shtisel*, the religious characters do not own a car in *Ömer*. However, different from *Shtisel*, it appears to be a matter of economic class more than a religious reason.

Intrigue, skepticism, and distrust in *Ömer*

What are the odds of being evicted from your home, your granddaughter falling into the hands of a prostitution ring, your other grandchild being kidnapped, your son being ensnared by a political Islamist cult crime network, your daughter-in-law becoming pregnant, and your son being beaten -all in the same day? (S2, E37 & E38) *Ömer*'s proves it is possible. Though fiction, it cannot be disregarded as a total fantasy. Fiction still reflects the values, beliefs, sensitivities, and ideology of the society. It can also represent the already existing debates from the public sphere.

In the abovementioned episode, Eda (the teenage granddaughter) is kidnapped by a prostitution gang, but no one thinks of filing a police complaint; the family tries to save her themselves, fighting with armed men in the process. Going to the police becomes the last resort. This aligns with themes of a lack of trust in law and the tendency to bring justice through personal accounts. Moreover, when they go to the police station to file a complaint, political Islamist gang members are immediately informed about everything that happens in the prosecutor's office or the police station. This reflects the real-life experiences of Turkish society, mirroring the period when the political Islamist crime network, Gülenists, captured the state institutions and were able to gather information secretly and illegally. Within this context, we see a represented parallel between everyday politics and fiction. This parallel illustrates how TV dramas "continuously articulate the value system of the society" because with their stories, some underlying norms and values are dramatized, and through dramas, we discover these norms and values. In this sense, "characters represent cultural values" of the society they symbolize, and they "personify the contradictions" (Oud, Weijers & Wester, 1997, p. 6-7).

The narratives of the two dramas diverge drastically in some respects. While *Shtisel* reflects a drama-free, calm, and naturally flowing everyday life; *Ömer* has anything but tranquility as it is one intrigue after another in their daily lives. Being distrustful towards the outer world, continuous doubtfulness, distrust towards the rule of law and the justice system, trying to take the law into one's own hands, being anxious, the feeling of the need to protect oneself, and the dangerous world syndrome are some of the dominant traits characters in *Ömer* reflect.

Emancipation of women or pseudo-feminist narrative?

Another salient narrative that appears in both series is the issue of gender. A 'liberal narrative' for women and a discourse of 'emancipation of women' have characterized global media productions in the last decade. This narrative shows itself in women represented to be taking an active part in working life, having more economic and individual rights and liberties. However, by merely rhetorically mentioning the gender (in)equality between lines in a didactic tone without internalizing this rhetoric in the attitudes of the characters, *Ömer* uses this frame of 'emancipation and empowerment of women' to reproduce the existing traditional gender roles in Turkish society while *Shtisel* represents a relatively more convincing way in which the gender equality is not covered superficially but appears to be internalized via both the discourses and behaviors of the characters.

Ömer's woman narrative can, therefore, be described as a pseudo-feminist narrative, one that popularly uses feminist concerns without reflecting them in the attitudes and behaviors of the actors, the narrative arc, or the plot of the drama. Eventually, it turns out to be a narrative where women's emancipation remains just a rhetorical element while the behaviors and attitudes in the drama remain traditional and reproduce existing traditional norms, values, and identities.

Since both dramas are about orthodox religious people's everyday lives, the first gender-related issue is about the individual rights and liberties of women. One of these freedoms comes with 'driving' since it provides individual mobility, speed, and further space for women. In other words, driving can be interpreted as a symbol of autonomy with accelerated mobility. In *Shtisel*, the topic is treated in the case of Tovi, the wife of Zvi Arye (a devoted yeshiva student) when she starts driving (S3, E6). Considering the position of women in public life in the ultra-Orthodox Haredi community, driving turns out to be an illustrator of 'excess freedom' for women who are thought to be ideal mothers and wives. When Tovi ignores her husband's 'warnings' about the inconvenience of driving for their community and gets her driver's license and then a car without asking Zvi Arye, his first reaction is negative. But when Tovi persuades her husband to join for a tour in the new car, pointing out that the color is Zvi Arye's favorite, and it will provide a comfortable commute for him to yeshiva school, Zvi Arye starts to relish his journey with his wife flattering him 'like a King.'

This scene illustrates two things about gender role representation. Without knowing his wife's driving issue, Zvi Arye is having a conversation about women's position in public life with his colleague at the Kollel. When he said to Zvi Arye that his wife wants to go to university and become a lawyer, Zvi Arye responds with surprise, "a university [for a woman]?" and the colleague makes it more 'proper' for Haredim by saying that it is "an Orthodox university for women" and continues, "Honestly, I tried to dissuade her, but she wouldn't listen. Women these days are like that. This is an issue, a serious problem." As a 'manly' reaction, Zvi says that "What does it mean she wouldn't listen?" and then he quotes from the book, referring to women: "Your man shall rule over you" (S3, E6). Although the dialogue illustrates how ultra-Orthodox men want to keep their power over women, Tovi's scenes revealing her driver's license and car complicate that. She challenges her husband on traditional roles, and it turns out that as long as Tovi does not mar Zvi Arye's manly image in the community, he will consent to Tovi's driving. In the following scenes, Tovi acts pragmatically, flattering her husband when the community men are around, and pretending that she recognizes her husband's manly authority and listens to whatever he says.

The same plot on driving is covered in *Ömer* quite differently. When Şükran first learns how to drive secretly, away from her husband, Tahir is depicted as a strict opponent of using technology and women's public appearance and liberties. By the time Şükran gets her driving license and decides to drive, the family has already passed through many incidents and Tahir turns out to be a more supportive, understanding male character. Thus, Tahir starts to support Şükran in driving. However, in *Shtisel*, the audience sees the independent agency of Tovi -both financially and rhetorically- as she buys her car and decides independently since she is the one who earns money in the family[7] and thus retains her autonomy while resisting her husband. In *Ömer* however, the autonomy was 'given' from Tahir to Şükran, and this driving scene remains isolated. Later, we never see Şükran driving or owning a car. Even when female characters (including Şükran) come to own a restaurant later on, they cannot earn enough money without the help and 'entrepreneurial wisdom' of Tahir (S2, E47 and E48). All in all, the depictions of women characters and the autonomy and agency attributed to them differ in the two dramas drastically.

The discursive differences in *Ömer* and *Shtisel* narratives on driving can alternatively be interpreted with "intertextuality" in the narrative of the scripted format adaptation (Kesirli Unur, 2020). Intertextuality associates "TV fiction with other texts as well as the

multiple dimensions of the social and the historical for making meaning in the local contexts" (Kesirli Unur, 2020, pp. 4-5) and when the series were adapted, the original "narrative had to go through a secondary localization process," (Kesirli Unur, 2020, p. 7) to make the adapted script compatible with the cultural codes of the society where the adaptation would be aired. Through the "secondary localization" process of *Ömer*'s script adaptation, driving a car appears as a significant symbol of modernization -a very similar discursive component of that we see in "car narratives" in Turkish novel writing as Parla (2003) ascertained. Tovi's "possession" and Şükran's "dispossession" of a car can also be interpreted not a simple indicator of class differences, but as a matter of "Westernization and formation of national identity" (here, in Şükran's case, 'non-Westernization' and 'formation of conservative identity') at an intertextual level as Kesirli Unur (2015, p. 146) shrewdly analyzed for the case of the format adaptation *Kuzey Güney*. Şükran's case sounds complex here because of the inconsistency between discursive and behavioral narratives in *Ömer*. As mentioned previously, on one hand, Şükran's learning of driving can construct an example for the pseudo-feminist narrative in *Ömer* in which driving is associated with modernization/Westernization; on another, unlike Tovi, this association is not internalized in Şükran's agency.

In *Shtisel*, there are more to-the-point, policy-oriented, or modernity-related topics of gender such as surrogacy, abortion, and divorce; in *Ömer*, these topics remain superficial. When Ruchami's pregnancy causes serious health problems, the couple goes to the head of the yeshiva and asks his opinion on surrogacy, and the head yeshiva states that "surrogacy is prohibited in Torah, but you are in a zone that Torah does not cover. That is why whatever you decide would be suitable with Torah" (S3, E2).

On the other hand, *Ömer* reflects what already traditionally exists in society. For example, in Türkiye in current public life, surrogacy is not legally possible, and similarly, it is not a subject at all in the drama, either. Abortion is only covered as a compulsory case when Gamze encounters health problems, but not as a matter of individual choice. *Ömer*'s narrative does not refrain from bringing conflictual discussions into the script, but it concludes in a conservative fashion, which is compatible with the present hegemonic view in Turkish society when it comes to some socio-political issues such as abortion and women's agency.

The two dramas also differ in their depictions of masculinity. In *Ömer*, the men of the neighborhood gather, go to fight, intervene in situation, and find their solutions to problems; but in *Shtisel*, men and women use their agency to solve their problems. Nonetheless, due to the variety of male characters, there is no single depiction of masculinity in the two dramas. *Shtisel* portrays Shulem as a pragmatist, traditionally masculine, and old Jew; Akiva as a moderate, confused, easy-going, and more understanding male; Zvi Arye as a pious, traditionally masculine character but this masculinity remains a show-case feature when he was with his wife.

As a rhetoric of women's empowerment and emancipation, Şükran's support of her daughter Eda after being victimized by the prostitution gang sounds initially liberating. She comforts her by saying "You have done nothing to be ashamed of." However, Tahir enters the scene trying to lock down Şükran (his wife who wants a divorce) and Vicdan (Tahir's first love and mother of his 'illegitimate' daughter, Nilüfer), forbidding their daughters from going to school and smashing their phones. Throughout these scenes, we witness male violence to the fullest. Despite a short discourse on 'women-supporting-women,' it is shadowed by male violence, women are victimized, and their agency is taken from them.

Another point about masculinity in *Ömer* is that no matter what the male characters do (such as cheating or deceiving their wife, having an illegitimate child from a past affair, abandoning their wife and children for another woman, secluding their wife forcefully, seizing their wife and children's mobile phones and breaking them, mistreatment their family, etc.), they are eventually accepted happily as beloved husbands and fathers. The final episode (S2, E54) illustrates all these male-friendly depictions in the marriage scene. The supposed women's emancipation discourse is demolished in this episode in which all main women characters are represented as 'longing for wearing a white wedding dress as their childhood dream,' and ready to accept their grooms as they are. The women's agency suddenly disappears, and the women's freedom rhetoric is forgotten. All women characters forgive their husbands and remarry them. The 'outlier' cases - such as Vicdan (the former 'jezebel' and new 'magdalene'), the womanizer Hakan, the 'rebellious' Gamze- are all 'properly tamed, redesigned' and only then do they acquire a place in this conservative community. Women's emancipation remains a pseudo-narrative that cannot internalize the values of emancipation in the attitudes and behaviors of the characters. They end where they began: in the accepted norms and values of a conservative lifestyle.

Representation of religion and everyday life: Politicized and depoliticized narratives

In this part, the results of two themes are analyzed: the representation of religion, and the narratives on politics-religion interaction. The main argument is that *Shtisel* depoliticizes religion and does not bring political discussions from everyday life to fiction, or when rarely it does, it portrays it in the least conflicting way possible; and *Ömer* re-politicizes the already existing conflicting identities and values of the society, and brings real-life conflicts, events, and norms into fictional narrative more provocatively and intriguingly.

When *Shtisel* is examined with the political and economic context in which it is broadcasted, it becomes easier to interpret the religion-politics narrative and the transfer of issues and attitudes from public debates into fiction. As mentioned in the introduction, considering a religious genre series in Israeli television, and the funding by AC is common in these types of series in the Israeli context. As Peleg (2015b) pointed out "focusing primarily on television programming, the foundation has sought to raise the religious consciousness of Israeli Jews and bridge the gap between secular and religious Israelis" (p.16). This explains well why politics were not a matter to be touched upon lucidly in *Shtisel* whereas in *Ömer*, we could find many issues transferred from everyday politics into the episodes.

Shtisel 'depoliticizes religion' in many respects by not addressing real-life conflicts or issues. However, *Ömer* 're-politicizes the politics' by overstressing and reformulating existing fault lines in Turkish society. In depoliticizing religion, *Shtisel* makes the religious characters "ordinary" (Peleg, 2015b, p. 18) and disconnects them from the public sphere. *Ömer* recreates current public discussions in fiction by further dramatizing them[8]. Thus, *Ömer* is more emblematic of the way Curran's approach defines public sphere-entertainment relations.

What could be the reason for the above-mentioned difference in de/politicization in these two dramas? OGM owner Güvenatam's statement should be recalled: "we do well what we know the best: the conservative people" (Vivarelli, 2023). In *Shtisel*, however, the picture is more complex, and we need to understand its economic and political background and the involvement of political actors. As denoted above, the post-2000s TV series in Israel are "symbolic sites for the negotiation of Jewish identity" and they provide a communication channel for religious communities in Israel, hence, they turn

out to be "creating more visibility of these versions of Israeliness on the small screen, and deconstructing stereotypes thereof, allowing for more complex images of" these religious communities and individual Israeli Jews (Talmon, 2013, p. 55). But what is the reason for this kind of homogeneous presentation in reflecting Jewish religious communities in different TV series? Talmon (2013, p. 55) explains it:

> The dramatic elaboration of intercultural encounters and conflicts in these TV dramas are contextualized by the Tzav Piyus project of reconciliation, which was initiated as a consequence of Yitzhak Rabin's assassination and the painful sociocultural fissures associated with it, as well as the larger enterprise of the AVI CHAI foundation—the promotion both in Israel and in North America of an awareness and discourse about Jewish identity as a complex and diversified experience.

How, then, in *Shtisel*, this reconciliation of different identities is achieved? Bobrowicz and Gustafsson Lundberg (2021) fairly argue that in this drama, the Haredim characters "are depicted as people who deal with the same problems as everyone else" (say it religious, ultra-Orthodox, or secular), "which makes a relation between secular and religious less dichotomic" (p.178). In other words, the issues -such as "doubts and severe struggles for independence" (Bobrowicz and Gustafsson Lundberg, 2021, p. 178) in *Shtisel* are depicted like ordinary problems for any person, independent of their religious community.

As some other examples of avoidance/absence of bringing public debates into *Shtisel*'s script, it can be summarized as the issue of military service[9], Ashkenazim-Haredim or Sephardim-Haredim differences (S3, E1)[10], Palestine or Palestinians, and so on. The absence of military service from the covered topics is especially interesting because it is one of the most hotly debated issues among Haredi, the state, and the Israeli society. Because Haredi males get yeshiva education in their lifetime as a command of their religious belief, they are exempted from the obligatory military service[11]. The debate on the topic is not a matter of being exempted from the service, but a total non-involvement of Haredim with any of the political and military issues. Two main attitudes about political issues from real life appear in *Shtisel*'s representations: 1) 'nostalgic grieve/sigh,' and 2) 'anti-Zionist emphasis' made for the state institutions and celebrations.

Rebbetzin Erblich's (lifelong friend of Shulem's mother Malka) suicide scene is striking as 'nostalgia for the selected past,' Erblich decides to commit suicide when she learns that she has a terminal disease. Malka 'accompanies' her friend by being with her in the nursery room. Erblich takes the pills and asks Malka to turn on the TV for the news. While Erblich is dying, the audience can hear some bits and pieces from the news: "Germany after 70 years… Remembering the survivors of the Holocaust… German youth want to visit the holocaust survivors in Israel." With the sound of the TV in the background, from the two holocaust survivors, Erblich dies, and Malka "accompanies" her in spirit. (S2, E4). This scene creates nostalgia for the selected moment. Despite addressing this moment from history in the drama, the audience never sees a similar coverage of the 'other moments in' the past when it comes to the issue of Palestine, and the history of Israeli-Palestinian relations, for instance. This is another indicator that the drama does not cover or represent contemporary debates or conflicts in Israeli society. The AC funding and its agenda-setting via entertainment could be one of the reasons of this outcome[12].

Discussion and conclusion

The data analysis illustrates that *Shtisel* prescribes a sympathetic, apolitical view of the Haredi community. The real-life political debates are not covered, and the Haredi community is depicted as a peaceful community of ordinary people. It does not represent a secular-religious dichotomy, but the problems characters face are mostly routine everyday life problems that secular people can encounter as well. Therefore, the drama 'humanizes' the Haredi community, and does not highlight its radical religious features such as early marriage, not educating girls, ascetic life, throwing stones to protest obligatory military service, etc. Similarly, current political conflicts such as Israeli aggression toward Palestine, and its historical details never find a representation in the narrative.

It is a different story in *Ömer*. Although *Ömer* does not represent an ultra-Orthodox Muslim community, contrary to *Shtisel*, the representations of religious and identity-based differences become more apparent, and these differences appear to reflect the main causes of conflict in Turkish society. The pious Ademoğlu family does not live in an isolated space, unlike the Haredi community. Nonetheless, there are some socio-political real-life problems that the fiction does not deal with but superficially mentions. Abortion, early marriage, and women's empowerment are some of them.

This article traces two differing representations of 'religion as a matter of everyday life' in these two dramas: Despite both dramas' reflections and narratives on the pious people's bemusement with modernization, while *Shtisel* represents religion as a natural element embedded in everyday life practices, *Ömer* reflects religion as a site of contestation, polarization, and skepticism of differing identities.

All in all, Curran's (2005) theory on radical democracy appears to be explanative for *Ömer*'s narratives but is limited to explaining *Shtisel*. The reason for this limitation is that without taking the political, economic and industrial characteristics of media productions, a purely radical democratic framework *per se* would be restricted to understanding the relations between the public sphere and entertainment as the AC case illustrates. *Ömer* has illustrated how Turkish society communes with its existing norms, values, and identities, and their reproductions via entertainment. Without consideration of the political economy of media production, Curran's radical democratic explanation *per se* would not sufficiently explain the functions attributed to entertainment and fiction. As the AC example in the Israeli case illustrated, the funding of the TV programs is not only a matter of finance, but it comes with its socio-political agenda including the values and debates that happen to exist in the public sphere.

Overall, in testing Curran's radical democratic perspective through two cases from the Global South, some concluding remarks are necessary. The data confirm that, when analyzing entertainment productions, the radical democratic claim that 'society is communing with itself through entertainment media' provides a rather explanative theoretical framework, especially in contrast to classical liberal or Marxist approaches. However, Curran's radical democratic framework, in its current form, appears somewhat limited in its ability to fully interpret scripted format adaptations, where production and consumption processes are notably more complex. As the literature indicates, these adaptations involve multifaceted elements such as intermediality, intertextuality, localization, and cultural codes. The data show that, while acknowledging the political role and significance of entertainment is crucial, these complex aspects of format adaptations suggest that the political meanings and roles attributed to entertainment and fiction are accurate but ultimately offer a limited explanation unless Curran's theory communicates the culture-oriented theoretical explanations to media productions.

ENDNOTES

1 The series and *Muhannad* were not only popular in Morocco but the Middle East, which would later be examined as the "neo-Ottoman cool" (Kraidy and Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Kraidy, 2019, p.155).

2 The "haredim" (plural of haredi) refers to one of the Jewish ultra-Orthodox communities which was headed by their rabbis, strictly follow Jewish religious law in their rituals and everyday life practices, separate themselves from Gentile (non-Jewish) society, have high birth rates, and their own synagogues and schools, which are called "yeshiva" schools for Talmudic learning (Britannica, n.d.).

3 It is also called The Film and Television Project (Dardashti, 2015, p. 87).

4 Öztürkmen (2018) and Uğur Tanrıöver (2022) examine the Turkish dizi genre.

5 Not to confuse the drama name with the protagonist, the drama will be addressed in *italics*.

6 S signifies 'season' and E is 'episode.'

7 The yeshiva seminary students do not work but study Torah in their lifetime. This is the dominant approach among Haredim. Since these seminary male students cannot earn money, either their wives earn money, or they get community or state subsidies. This is one of the debated topics in Israeli society. Male Haredim are also exempted from compulsory military service in Israel.

8 *Ömer* sometimes refrains from politicization. For example, in Israeli version of the show, Ruchami marries at age 15. For the corresponding Turkish character Emine, however, *Ömer* does not depict early-age marriage which is a hotly debated topic and a fault line in the Turkish public sphere.

9 The director explains why they do not bring forward the issue of military service: "The perception of Haredim is those people who throw stones and that don't want to go to the army. Yes, that's true, but they are also people, and I want audiences meet them as people" (Dardashti, 2015, p. 90). In other words, with *Shtisel*, the

producers want to transform the existing image of ultra-Orthodox Jews into a moderate one. As a form of "neo-Zionism," the AC-funded productions leave "less room for multifaceted representation of Palestinian Israelis [for example] and other non-Jewish Israeli citizens on the screen" (Dardashti, 2015, p. 96).

10 Giti disagrees with her husband and opposes her son Yose'le's wish to marry a Sephardic girl, yet the audience is not told why and what differences exist between these two religious communities.

11 This could change though as the Supreme Court in Israel ordered in June 2024 ultra-Orthodox Jewish men to be drafted into military service (Rubin, Parker & Soroka, 2024).

12 Recently, AC has changed which themes will be covered in TV shows it funds. In the context of the Israeli war against Gaza, they have decided to produce media content that projects a conflict between Hamas and Palestinians. Ilan Sigal, CEO of Yes Studios, says, "We're doing what's necessary, especially now, in the time of war." The drama, East Side (2023) appears as the product of this decision (Steinberg, June 6, 2024). The producer company of East Side is the same as Shtisel's: Abot Hameiri Barkai & Freemantle.

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