

ROUNDTABLE

Serial Murder and Honor: Rereading the Story of an Ottoman Murderess

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Murderesses are not among the stock characters of Ottoman prose stories, but they give us a rare opportunity to discuss how being a woman and committing a crime is represented in literary fiction. They also give us the opportunity to discuss how these stories might have been perceived by their audiences. With that in mind, I suggest a close reading of a story that I will summarize here. The story raises questions regarding narratives, gender, and honor as represented and perceived in fiction.

The story is titled “The Story of a Trickster Woman Who Had Murdered about Twenty to Thirty People,” and it is located among many other stories in a miscellanea held by the Manuscript and Rare Books Library of the Turkish Language Association (Türk Dil Kurumu El Yazması ve Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi) in Ankara, under catalog number A142. It comprises a travelogue, several pieces of prose, treatises, mirabilia, and prose stories.¹ The volume does not have an introduction or conclusion, leaving readers in the dark about possible motivations for the compilation. The travelogue dates the compilation of the volume to the 19th century, however the subsequent texts and stories can be traced back to earlier centuries, as early as the 15th century.

The title (with the phrase “trickster woman”), its location in the story collection, and its final lines emphasizing the evil tricks of women locate it within the corpus of “women’s wiles” stories, a prolific genre of the Islamicate storytelling tradition.² In women’s wiles stories, women fool men using unimaginable tricks, commonly driven by their insatiable sexual desires or by their irresistible urge to teach men a lesson by showing off their abilities. These stories are commonly short, with gaps in the plot, featuring stock types rather than characters. The sheer number of them in story collections indicates that they might have been popular readings, be it for entertainment, edification, or both. In most instances, as in the example discussed below, the author of the stories or their compiler is not known, and

¹ The story is titled “Hikaye-i bir hilekar ‘avret yigirmi otuz adem katl etdiği hikayedir.” For further discussion of the miscellanea and other stories in it, see Nazlı İpek Cora, “The Story Has It’: Prose, Gender, and Space in the Early Modern Ottoman World,” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2018). Throughout this article, I follow modern Turkish orthography, with the addition of the letter ‘ayn for direct quotations.

² For an overview of women’s wiles stories in Islamicate contexts, see Gayane Karen Merguerian and Afsanah Najmabadi, “Zulaykha and Yusuf: Whose ‘Best Story?’” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 29, no. 4 (1997): 485–508; Afsanah Najmabadi, “Reading and Enjoying: ‘Wiles of Women’ Stories as a Feminist,” *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1999): 203–22; Margaret A. Mills, “Whose Best Tricks? Makr-i Zan as a Topos in Persian Oral Literature,” *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 2 (1999): 261–70; Margaret A. Mills, “Women’s Tricks: Subordination and Subversion in Afghan Folktales,” in *Thick Corpus, Organic Variation and Textuality in Oral Tradition*, ed. L. Honko (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2000), 453–87; Margaret A. Mills, “The Gender of the Trick: Female Tricksters and Male Narrators,” *Asian Folklore Studies*, 60, no. 2 (2001): 237–58; and David Selim Sayers, “The Wiles of Women in Ottoman and Azeri Texts” (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2014).

the circulation of stories and their many versions recorded and narrated over centuries complicate the matter of authorship. These stories also do not fit into the neat categorizations of folk or classical literature, as different versions of a single story can be found in different collections with other characteristics. In short, it is not possible to date the story that I will discuss below, nor is it possible to know its author. It also is impossible to comment on its popularity or impact, as I have failed to locate any other version of it in other manuscripts I have worked on or in better-known collections such as *Forty Viziers* and *A Thousand and One Nights*. This, however, does not mean much by itself, as we lack a comprehensive overview of the corpus of the Ottoman prose stories.³

What is, then, the use of focusing on a single story left to molder in a miscellanea? This story gives us the opportunity to discuss the case of a female murderess and rethink the available frameworks in which we discuss agency and honor. To do that, I will first summarize the story and then discuss the conceptualization of female honor, as the female character takes matters (literally) into her own hands. I argue that instead of portraying the protagonist solely as a victim, we also should focus on her actions as a murderess as she fights to protect her honor. This is not to disregard that the societal norms were putting pressure on her such that she had to protect her honor, but to emphasize that she took the initiative to defend her honor, even going as far as to commit murder.

This story makes it easier to attribute agency to the woman, as she narrates her own story within a frame narrative. The story has it that, while on his pilgrim's journey, a pious and distinguished man encounters an austere woman walking toward Mecca. The woman kindly refuses his offers of a camel ride or some sustenance and states that she has already performed the pilgrimage twenty-four times on foot. The man is curious to know why, and she offers to tell her story when in Mecca. When they meet there, she starts narrating the story.

She is the daughter of an established mufti who has a lot of students. She also has been learning alongside them. She has had many distinguished and prominent suitors, but has rejected them all. One day, when she is watching her father through the window as he is leaving home, her eyes fall on a very handsome young man; he also sees her, and it is love at first sight for both of them. She invites him in, but they are interrupted by the mufti, who has come back to pick up a book. She hides the young man in the granary. When she is alone again, she returns to the granary, only to find him dead.⁴

Helpless, she puts him in the oven pit and goes to the stable next door to seek help. She picks out a black Arab groom who attends the horses, asks for his help, and tells him that he can have anything he wants if he follows her instructions.⁵ He obeys and vows not to disclose anything. However, when he sees the dead body, he cries out—it is his effendi's son. She begs him for help and repeats her offer. He threatens her: she shall be his. If not, he will publicly disgrace her.⁶ She has to agree. Consequently, he takes all her jewels and deflowers her. He then leaves with the corpse.

To her horror, the groom's demands do not stop. At night, drunk and loud, he comes to her house and throws a stone to draw her attention. To avoid disgrace, she goes out to meet him.⁷ He declares that all the other grooms are out drinking and everyone but him has a lover; thus, she must accompany him through the night's entertainments at the stable. If not, he will disgrace her in public.⁸ Helpless, she goes. While she is sitting knee-to-knee

³ For a discussion of the questions of literary categorization and scholarship on prose fiction in the example of this miscellanea, see Cora, "The Story Has It."

⁴ There is no information about why or how the lover had died.

⁵ The groom is referred to as a black Arab groom (*siyah 'arab seyis*) at the initial mention; later on he is described as a *zenği*.

⁶ *Zenği eyitdi, kendini bana teslim edersen ne güzel yoksa seni 'aleme rüsvay ederim, dedik de. . .* Türk Dil Kurumu El Yazması ve Nadir Eserler Kütüphanesi, Ankara (hereafter TDK), A 142, 345a.

⁷ *Pes rüsvay olmayam deyü zarüri taşra çıktım. . .* TDK 142A, 345a.

⁸ *Yoksa seni 'alemlere rüsvay ederim, dedi.* TDK A 142, 345a.

with the groom, some of the women at the gathering recognize her and humiliate her by spitting in her face, saying: “Girl, how disgraceful it is!”⁹ She responds by saying that anything can befall a person and kindly asks if they could keep this to themselves. Yet she does not leave things to chance. Since she does not want to drink wine, they designate her as the cupbearer, and she makes all of them drunk. She then takes a sharp knife and beheads them all. An interrogation follows, but despite its thoroughness no one suspects the mufti’s daughter, and she is saved.

Another problem arises when she is married off to a relative. Afraid that people will learn she has lost her virginity out of wedlock, she purchases a female slave of the same age and appearance and talks her into switching places with her in the nuptial chamber. On the wedding night, the plan goes seamlessly—until the female slave refuses to leave her bed and return to her designated status. The slave insults her mistress, saying that she has lost her virginity to a stranger, yet she pretends to be chaste.¹⁰ Astonished, the newly married woman throttles the slave and ends up killing her.¹¹ She drags her body out of the house, places her on the woodpile in the shed, and places a lit candle under the wood. She goes back to bed—back to her husband’s side—while the female slave’s corpse burns to ashes.

Upon her father’s death, she asks her husband’s permission to withdraw from her marital duties and perform the pilgrimage. He accepts. She has taken a vow to perform the pilgrimage for every individual she has murdered, and, this being the twenty-fifth, a few still remain. At the end of the story, the male narrator, who had been listening to the story, silently prays that God should protect men from women’s tricks, compares women to the devil, and recognizes women’s superiority (in devilry).

The story of the murderess is simultaneously typical and peculiar. How is it typical? Its protagonist is the wily woman who will stop at nothing to reach her aim, only comparable to the devil—as seen in women’s wiles stories. However, this tale also is peculiar. There is no “laughter or irony,” which Margaret Mills defines as the characteristic features of the storytelling tradition of women’s wiles.¹² Women’s wiles stories usually end on a humorous note, by a woman outsmarting a man, who is generally clueless, using her guile and wit. The audience turns into an accomplice, presumably laughing at the ignorant man who is unaware of being tricked—and they either celebrate or chastise the woman’s victory. In this story, the clueless man turned into a laughingstock is absent, as is the trick that awakens astonishment and awe among the audience. The only trick the protagonist happens to play is to place her concubine into the bed, and even that is only partially successful, as she needs to kill the concubine to save the day (or, to be more precise, the night). This story, instead, is a story of a woman trying to protect her (and by extension, her father’s) honor and social standing by taking many risks. Beginning with the unexpected death of her lover, the story presents a string of events in which she tries to protect her honor and avoid public disgrace.

In her article “Seductions of the ‘Honor Crime,’” Lila Abu-Lughod revisits the definition of honor crimes and its implication on the wider perception of Islam. Starting with its traditional definition as the killing of a woman to protect the family honor and as a “culturally specific form of violence,” Abu-Lughod argues that “the culture itself is taken to be the cause of criminal violence. Thus, the category stigmatizes not a particular act but entire cultures or ethnic communities.”¹³ This causality, she claims, contributes to the “negative image of Islam or subaltern communities that itself produces animosity of violence.”¹⁴ This

⁹ *Kız bu ne rüsvaylıktır, dediler.* TDK A 142, 345b.

¹⁰ *Cariye eyitti: Ey nâbekâr, sen kızlığını yabanda bozdurdun. Şimdi bu hile ile pakizelik davasını mı edersin, dedi.* TDK A 142, 346a15–17.

¹¹ The use of tense may indicate that this was not premeditated: *cariyenin boğazına yapıştım, şöyle sıkılmış ki canı çıkmış.* TDK A 142, 346a17–b1.

¹² Mills, “Whose Best Tricks?” 269–70.

¹³ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Seductions of the ‘Honor Crime,’” *differences* 22, no. 1 (2011): 17–18.

¹⁴ Abu-Lughod, “Seductions of the ‘Honor Crime,’” 18.

conceptualization of honor crimes consolidates a static image of patriarchy, in which women are seen as properties without any agency. Based on her field research, Abu-Lughod challenges this portrayal, arguing instead that women actively participate in “shared and completely lived moral code,” and they are personally responsible for and concerned with their ways of conduct. She underlines the fact that the codes organizing moral conduct dictate the lives of all members of society.¹⁵

Following Abu-Lughod’s emphasis on women’s agency and participation in making and dictating social conduct, I want to revisit the murderess’s actions and the conceptualization of female honor. In the story, being publicly disgraced is not a hypothetical threat for the protagonist, nor is it an interpretation of the modern reader. The word *rüşvay*, which can be translated as publicly disgraced or dishonored, keeps appearing in the embedded dialogues within the text: the Arab groom threatens to “publicly disgrace” her if she does not oblige his wishes. She had to follow him at night “to avoid disgrace” and accompany him throughout the entertainment. Other women at the party spit on her face to show their discontent and tell her, “how disgraceful it is!” Her killing spree begins in the face of all these threats—to avoid public disgrace.

According to the commonly accepted definition, the protagonist’s actions do not fall within the definition of honor crimes—yet, from the pure sense of the word, these are honor crimes: she kills to avoid disgrace and to preserve her honor (and that of her father). There is no implication in the text that there were any threats to her safety or that she was concerned about her well-being, except for being publicly disgraced. Maybe ironically, she did not even engage in a consummated relationship with the young man she invited into her home—they were interrupted immediately. The possibility that people would think that the newly met couple had been involved in sexual intercourse leads her into action, putting her in this vulnerable position. Starting with the cover-up of the seemingly natural death of her lover, she keeps killing people and seems to have succeeded in avoiding disgrace in society, as she does not face any consequences.¹⁶

Understanding the story as a success story and saying that she is an active subject with agency, a strong and independent woman killing everyone who may cause her harm, would be a rather simplistic reading. Society and its moral codes drive her actions. However, within a patriarchal system that is thoroughly disadvantageous to women, she resorts to claiming her agency through acts of murder, albeit silent ones, which is emblematic of her internalization of the social codes and simultaneously her transgression of them. In contrast, if we were to see her simply as a victim of patriarchy, we would strip her of this agency, and on a broader level, deny women their active role in making as well as subverting the moral codes of society.¹⁷

The picture the story reveals is in this way complex, making us think about the immediate actions of various women and different layers of their experiences concerning honor. The plurality of women’s status and voice in this story instigates this complexity. Having women depicted as narrators in such stories is rare, and hearing the voices of other women who are not the protagonists is even rarer, especially women of lower social strata and enslaved women. Could it be because the woman tells the story? The immediate social encounters of a woman are expected to be with other women, as this case reveals. However, other women in this story simply accentuate her loneliness—not only because they perish by her own hand, but because of her social standing. For example, we hear other women chastising her as she is serving wine at the gathering. In another setting, this would have been unimaginable (as she is the mufti’s daughter), but her fallen state and the scene of the

¹⁵ Abu-Lughod, “Seductions of the ‘Honor Crime,’” 18–22.

¹⁶ The speculative reader may ask if he met this sudden death because of the fear of being disgraced by the mufti; this raises the question of what honor and public disgrace may mean for a man interrupted during an illicit encounter.

¹⁷ On women’s agency, see Abu-Lughod, “Seductions,” 20–21.

encounter make this possible. The same is valid for her argument with the slave girl. The slave girl reprimands her after the fake consummation of the marriage, which points to the loose morals of the protagonist. These examples show us that women abide by the social rules and actively participate in their practice. And, in this instance, many of them die as a consequence.¹⁸

For the protagonist, being the mufti's daughter is both a blessing and a curse. It is a curse because she is subject to a higher social and communal pressure to excel in morals and conduct, and she has much to lose. On the other hand, being the mufti's daughter also is a blessing: it helps her get away with serial murder, because no one suspects she might be culpable. Another consequence of being the mufti's daughter is being educated, an additional rare characteristic of the protagonist of such a story. Readers usually learn how beautiful or devilish—or both—women are, depending on the context, but education or literacy is rarely, if ever, mentioned. But the modern reader can, again, take some liberties and ask further questions: Are these villainous actions fit for a woman who was educated alongside students of a mufti? Or, does *even* an educated woman engage in these acts, so the audience should beware of all women regardless of their status? Does her education make it possible to narrate her story so elaborately? Does her education give her a voice and make her find the right path, as exemplified by her atonement and choice to live as a chaste and devoted Muslim?

Although the reader meets the protagonist during her performance of the pilgrimage, her atonement is not even taken into consideration. Her repeated performances of the pilgrimage are simply represented as a tool to count her murders. Upon listening to the woman, the religious man was astonished; he notes that even the cursed devil is not as cunning as women and prays that the god shall protect all men from women's wiles.¹⁹ His intervention also contextualizes this story; he turns her narration into a story to present a moral lesson. Here, I do not argue that the man turns a memoir into a story, nor do I seek any truth from the narration. It is a piece of fiction. However, we should pay attention to how this narration is framed, that is, to give the impression that this has actually happened, as stated by a first-person narrator, the woman, who also is the protagonist. Following a superficial reading, this intervention turns the story into a simple piece of advice to men to stay away from women, depicting women at their most brutal—as imagined by the (presumably male) authors and narrators of these stories. This reading, however, raises another significant question: Why would a presumably male author or narrator create this fantasy of female cruelty? Was it yet another way to warn men against women's wiles or brutality, or were they aware of the possibilities of other (subtler) readings?

Just as we modern readers are able to read in the story various layers, its contemporaneous readers had similar opportunities to take liberties with it. In "Reading—and Enjoying —'Wiles of Women' Stories as a Feminist," Afsanah Najmabadi refers to women's wiles stories not as a manifestation of excessive female desire and guiles but as an expression of "primal male fantasy." Najmabadi challenges approaches that feed "reductionist realism."²⁰ Here, we can strip the story of the framing of the male narrator and read it as the story of a woman who committed serial murder to avoid public disgrace and spent the rest of her life in atonement. We have no means of knowing what kind of reaction this story initiated among different readers. Following the footsteps of Karen Merguerian and Afsanah Najmabadi, if we imagine a female readership, we can ask further questions: Would they be shocked that a woman, and a mufti's daughter at that, can be so cruel? Would these stories provide an

¹⁸ For a discussion of women judging other women's public visibility and behavior, see Dina Rizk Khoury, "Slippers at the Entrance or Behind Closed Doors: Domestic and Public Space for Mosul Women," in *Women in the Ottoman Empire: Middle Eastern Women in the Early Modern Era*, ed. Madeline C. Zilfi, (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 114–15.

¹⁹ *Ben dahi insaf etdüm ki iblis-i lain 'avretlerin hiyaline yetişmez. Hakk-ı te'ala cemi' erenleri 'avretlerin mekrinden emin eyleye, amin.* TDK A 142, 346b11–12.

²⁰ Najmabadi, "Reading and Enjoying," 204, 206.

outlet or steam-release valve (as Babcock-Abrahams describes in her discussion of trickster tales) such that women enjoy the way the protagonist gets away with murder, freeing her from all the inconveniences?²¹ Would women listening to this story sympathize with the ordeal of living with such a threat against one's honor and the burden of so many skeletons in the closet? Considering the woman's narration as a story of honor crimes may give us a new framework for rethinking the concept of honor and women's agency. What would initiate the actual horror in the readers' hearts and minds, the cold-blooded murder of dozens of people or the continuous anxiety caused by the immediate threat of being publicly disgraced?

Acknowledgments. I am thankful to Ebru Akcasu, Helga Anetshofer, Işın Taylan, and Yaşar Tolga Cora for carefully reading and commenting on this article, the guest editors Gülhan Balsoy and Nefertiti Takla for their insightful comments, and the IJMES editors for their valuable feedback.

²¹ Merguerian and Najmabadi, "Zulaykha and Yusuf"; Barbara Babcock-Abrahams, "'A Tolerated Margin of Mess': The Trickster and His Tales Reconsidered," *Journal of the Folklore Institute* 11, no. 3 (1975): 147–86.

Cite this article: N. İpek Hüner Cora (2022). "Serial Murder and Honor: Rereading the Story of an Ottoman Murderess." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 54, 135–140. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020743822000046>