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Nation and Identity in Turkish Crime Fiction

Reading Ahmet Ümit's Novels as a Medium
of Ideological Negotiation

2021

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Cover illustration: Edvard Munch, "The Murderer", 1910. oil on canvas, 94 × 154 cm.
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Das von Anwārī al Ḥusaynī entworfene Signet auf dem Umschlag symbolisiert eine Waage.

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Acknowledgments

“I’m astounded whenever I finish something. Astounded and distressed. My perfectionist instinct should inhibit me from finishing; it should inhibit me from even beginning,” writes Fernando Pessoa in his text 152 in *The Book of Disquiet*; and then he continues: “I begin because I don’t have the strength to think; I finish because I don’t have the courage to quit. This book is my cowardice” (2003: 136). I am sure anyone who has written a doctoral dissertation would empathize with Pessoa. And what is perhaps even more challenging than finishing a dissertation is then having to re-work it, after the defense, in order to turn it into a book. It is a challenge not only because one knows by heart almost every sentence on every page, and so it is inevitably boring to work on the text again, but also because this is a point at which one is brought face-to-face with one’s novice self. It is a point in the process of writing where it is impossible to stop, yet impossible to start over in search of something better or new.

For a fair amount of time I was detained in this purgatory stage of the final round of writing. One part of me wanted to revise the bulk of the text; another part told me to be loyal to the original, since a voice in my head kept asking, “what is a book for its author if not a way to remember a particular point in one’s life, a particular self in time and space?” In the end, I decided to publish my dissertation with only slight revisions, those suggested by my supervisors, mainly because I think of it as a medium of personal memory – which also reminds me of my cowardice. The sentences here remind me of the small campus of the American University in Almaty where I decided to focus on the masculinities; they remind me of the cold public library on snowy days in Kiev, where I first thought of the concept of post-secularism in relation to Ümit’s fiction; and of a few sunny days in Essen when I was revising my thoughts on Ottomania. In some sentences I can scent the lavenders of Çeşme or the *Glühwein* in Marburg. And in each chapter there is the joy of reuniting with Gökçe, and the pain of having to say goodbye yet again.

This book has taken years to finish... I started working on it initially as my PhD dissertation at the Justus Liebig University, Gießen, at the most difficult stage of my life, just a few months after the unexpected passing of my younger brother. While grief and yearning have surely delayed and obstructed the writing process, that very process also became one of the primary means to help pull me through, by reminding me of the magic of life not only through the novels and stories that kept me company, but mostly through the solidarity and friendship I have shared with so many people.

Among them, first of all, I wish to express my gratitude to my supervisor Mark Kirchner for being so responsive ever since our first email exchange, and for his endless support, patience, and understanding over many years. Likewise, Ansgar Nünning, my second supervisor, has always provided wholehearted support and inspiration when I needed it the most. My time at the International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture at the Justus Liebig University was immeasurably valuable, and I am grateful for the fellowship I was offered.

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Since my first years in Gießen, Béatrice has become one of my best friends as well as my mentor. I am grateful for her insightful suggestions on my work at every stage. It was Béatrice, five years ago, who informed me about the opening at the University of Duisburg-Essen, which led to me finding my academic home in Germany. I finished this manuscript here at the Institute of Turkish Studies at the University of Duisburg-Essen, surrounded by many scholars working on Turkey in many diverse disciplines. It has been a privilege to learn from them and be inspired by their ideas. Among them, Kader Konuk is a true role model, his diligent, cheerful, and intelligent demeanor encouraging me every day to become a better scholar. I also thank all of my colleagues at the Institute for their support, especially Sevgi Çıkrıkçı, with whom I shared late-night writing sessions in the Summer of 2018, and to Davut Yeşilmen, my officemate and partner in crime.

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My husband Gökçe Yanaşmayan took me out from darkness and gave me the strength to start over shortly after the loss of my brother. Gökçe deserves my gratitude for another reason, too. He has respected my decision to have a long-distance marriage and accepted being far from me and our son so that I could continue my academic path in Germany. I know

this is one of the most difficult sacrifices one could ask for, and I hope our lives will be long enough to compensate for every single minute we have missed together.

Our son Can Yanařmayan came into our lives at a time when Gökçe and I were young ‘nomads’. And as our lives have progressed through numerous countries and even more cities, Can has proved that ‘home’ can be anywhere in the world. I am grateful for this cheerful child, who sings me songs every day and never fails to ask if my book has finally been finished. I am proud to tell him that it has.

In addition to all the hands which have been holding mine over the years of this journey, there is the invisible hand of a boy. This thesis is dedicated to that boy, who will never have to grow up.

To the loving memory of Murat Tüfekçiođlu.

Note on Editions, Spelling, and Transcriptions

All the novels quoted in this book have several different editions, and page numbers may vary accordingly. Each translated quotation is given in Turkish in the footnotes so that anyone who wishes to refer to the original may do so. All excerpts from *Patasana* in Chapter 3 are from the first edition of its English translation by Amy Spangler (2011). All page numbers for the passages quoted from the other three novels are from the following editions: *Sis ve Gece* 41st edition (2014), *Kar Kokusu* 24th edition (2012), *Kukla* 17th edition (2010). The excerpts from the three novels in Chapter 4 are taken from *Beyoğlu Rapsodisi* 58th edition (2015); *Kavim* 38th edition (2015); and the first edition of the English translation of *Bab-ı Esrar, The Dervish Gate* by Elke Dixon (2011). The quotations in Chapter 5 are from the 3rd edition of the English translation of *İstanbul Hatırası, A Memento for Istanbul* by Rakesh Jobanputra (2017) and the 9th edition of *Sultanı Öldürmek* (2016). All translations of the novels which are not available in English are by Ayşe Pınar Köprücü-Rauth and myself. *Sultanı Öldürmek* was not available in English translation (appearing as *To Kill a Sultan*) until after this book was in final preparation for print, so translations are our own.

Throughout this book I have retained the Turkish spelling of private names and book titles, e.g., “Erdoğan” and yet have not made any changes if such names are spelled in English in the references. Likewise, I have preferred hyphenation for the term “post-secular(ism)” and yet do not use this if a reference sets it unhyphenated. Hence, the variation observed throughout the book does not indicate inconsistency, but rather the choices of different authors.

In the bibliography, the Turkish alphabetic order is followed.

Introduction

Ahmet Ümit is a phenomenon of contemporary popular culture in Turkey. For about two decades he has been seen as *the* author of Turkish crime fiction. While best known for his crime novels, Ümit has also published numerous collections of short stories, along with poems, folk tales, and an epic. He is not only one of the most prolific authors of contemporary Turkish literature, but also among “the best-selling and top-earning authors” (cf. Erguvan 2016: 339) in the country.¹ The first editions of his two recent novels *Elveda Güzel Vatanım* (*Farewell My Beautiful Homeland*, 2015) and *Kırlangıç Çığlığı* (*The Swallow’s Cry*, 2018) had record print runs of 250,000 and 300,000 copies respectively, and still the first edition of *Elveda Güzel Vatanım* was sold out within a week. Meanwhile, his previous works continue to be re-published, with some running into sixty editions, and his works have been adapted into graphic novels, radio plays, films, TV series, and an opera.² Ümit regularly appears on TV as a guest in cultural programs and has hosted a few himself.³ For years, he has been visible in innumerable public events across Turkey. Especially in his book signing events, his readers wait in line for hours to get his autograph. What is more, Ahmet Ümit is a keen user of social media. His official Instagram account, named after his renowned detective character Başkomiser Nevzat, is visited by thousands each day. In short, Ahmet Ümit is not just a popular author in contemporary Turkey, but also a prominent public figure.

At the same time, he is also experiencing rising international acclaim. His novels have been translated into over twenty languages, including Arabic, Urdu, Chinese, Russian, German and English. Recently described as “one of the most translated Turkish authors” (Erguvan 2016: 331), in 2014 the Turkish Exporters Assembly announced that he was also “the best-selling Turkish author abroad.” Since his novels became available in more

1 Annual data on authors’ earnings, publications, and sales of their works are collected by the business magazine *Forbes*.

2 *Elveda Güzel Vatanım* has been turned into a graphic novel with illustrations by Bartu Bölükbaşı; and three short stories featuring Başkomiser Nevzat were also published as graphic novels in 2005, 2007 and 2011, illustrated by İsmail Gülgeç, under the titles *Çiçekçinin Ölümü* (*The Death of the Florist*), *Tapınak Fahişeleri* (*Prostitutes of the Temple*), and *Davulcu Davut’u Kim Öldürdü?* (*Who Killed the Drummer Davut?*). NTV radio featured four of his works in the form of radio theatre: *Şeytan Ayrıntıda Gizlidir* (*The Devil is Hidden in the Details*, 2002), *Agatha’nın Anahtarı* (*Agatha’s Key*, 1999), *İstanbul Hatırası* (*A Memento for Istanbul*, 2010), and *Kavim* (*The Man Who Spoke the Language of Jesus*). His novella *Bir Sis Böler Geceyi* (*A Voice Divides the Night*, 1994) was made into a film by Ercan Arsever in 2012, released in English with the title *The Path of the Faithful*. The film adaptation of his first novel *Sis ve Gece* (*The Fog and the Night*, 1996) by Turgut Yasalar was released in 2007. The scripts of the TV series *Şeytan Ayrıntıda Gizlidir*, released in 2004, and *Karanlıkta Koşanlar*, released in 2001, are based on Ümit’s short stories and featured his famous detective Başkomiser Nevzat. In 2017, his epic tale *Ninatta’nın Bileziği* (*Ninatta’s Bracelet*, 2006) was made into an opera and staged by Süreyya Opera in Kadıköy, Istanbul.

3 Together with Mario Levi and İskender Pala, two popular contemporary Turkish authors, Ahmet Ümit was the host of the TV show *Önce Söz Vardı* and he also hosted the documentary *Yaşadığın Şehir*.

languages, Ümit has been increasingly attending book signings and readings in other countries, especially in Germany, where the translation of his *İstanbul Hatırası* (*A Memento for Istanbul*, 2010) was published by btb Verlag in 2017 under the title *Die Gärten von Istanbul*. It can thus confidently be claimed that Ahmet Ümit is one of the Turkish authors who have “contributed to Turkey’s vibrant literary scene and legacy within world literature” (Nolte, n.d.).

Considering the dynamics of today’s book market, Ümit’s national and international renown cannot be attributed solely to him. His previous publishing house Everest and his literary agency Kalem Ajans have played a crucial role in the national and international marketing and dissemination of Ümit’s fiction.⁴ Inextricable from these two, the reading public’s strong association of the name of Ahmet Ümit with the genre of crime fiction also plays a major role in his success, especially in Turkey. As shown by numerous articles in the recent edited collection *Crime Fiction as World Literature* (cf. Nilsson/Damrosch/D’haen 2017), the commercial success of national crime novels cannot be considered in isolation from the worldwide popularity of the genre itself (cf. Hedberg 2017; Berglund 2017; Bassnett 2017). In “Detective Fiction in Translation: Shifting Patterns of Reception” Susan Bassnett convincingly shows that the global book trade, translations, and the publishing industry “shape what readers choose to read,” concluding that “the national and the international are inextricably linked” (Bassnet 2017: 149). This is indeed the case in contemporary Turkey, where the international reputation, reception, and circulation of the genre, especially since the 2000s, have formed readers’ tastes and preferences. In Turkey, as in many countries, translations of best-selling crime novels by internationally acclaimed authors such as Dan Brown, Patricia Highsmith, Ian Rankin, Stieg Larsson, and Henning Mankell are available to Turkish readers. A manifestation of the current interest in the genre is prevalent in the fact that an increasing number of Turkish readers want to read crime fiction, and not merely in translation. Thanks to the intense marketing strategies of his publishing house and literary agency, Ümit’s novels are without a doubt the most widely available ones that respond to this increasing interest.⁵

From the Periphery to the Center?: Contemporary Crime Fiction in Turkey

Inside *and* outside Turkey, Ahmet Ümit is now considered as the foremost author of Turkish crime novels. Thus, in a 2013 article in the UK newspaper the *Independent*, Ümit was defined as “Turkey’s answer to Stieg Larsson” (Independent 2013). This comparison is not only indicative of the intricate link between the national and international in the reception of crime fiction, but also hints at the content of Ümit’s writing: since his early novels, the first one having appeared in 1996, Ahmet Ümit has been carefully following and adopting the global

4 In June 2019, after the completion of this thesis, Ahmet Ümit changed his publishing house from Everest to Yapı Kredi Yayınları.

5 A case in point is the co-organization of Everest and Kalem Ajans in 2015. For the launch of Ümit’s *Elveda Güzel Vatanım*, they gathered Ümit’s global publishers and translators in Istanbul. For details, see: publishingperspectives.com/2015/12/celebration-turkish-author-ahmed-umit, retrieved September 20, 2020.

trends in the genre.⁶ At the same time, he has been contributing to these trends himself through his own particular methods of constructing the nation. Accordingly, his works yield fruitful comparisons, highlighting several congruencies with crime novels from other national literatures. In a similar manner to Stieg Larsson's "ruthless demolition of the image of the Swedish social democratic ideal" (Forshaw 2012: 14), in his early work, Ahmet Ümit puts forward a social and political critique of his country. For instance, in his *Sis ve Gece* (The Fog and the Night, 1996), *Kar Kokusu* (The Scent of Snow, 1998), and *Kukla* (The Marionette, 2002), he touches upon the deep scars in recent Turkish history: he brings the focus to bear upon the clashes between the extreme rightist groups and the radicalized socialist left, the military coup of 1980 and its aftermath, and corrupt governments and the "deep state."⁷ His novels may as well be compared with the noir fiction of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán and Paco Ignacio Taibo II.⁸ Especially Ümit's later works, those published after the year 2000, allude to the works of these authors. Through the investigation of various crimes, Ümit's renowned detective Başkomiser Nevzat "scrutinize[s] the ambiguous nature of truth and justice" in his country and "reveal[s] the marginalized victims of neoliberal state policies" (Nichols 2011: 30) in ways similar to Montalbán's Pepe Carvalho and Taibo's Héctor Belascoarán Shayne. For instance, his *Sultanı Öldürmek* (To Kill a Sultan, 2012) overtly conveys Ümit's dissatisfaction with the urban renewal and the neoliberal transformation of Istanbul in contemporary Turkey, recalling the respective portrayals of Montalbán's Barcelona and Taibo's Mexico City.

The points of comparison of Ümit's novels with other fictional works from across the globe can easily be multiplied. We may note, for instance, how Ümit responds to the national and global religious resurgence. Three of his novels, namely *Beyoğlu Rapsodisi* (Beyoğlu Rhapsody, 2003), *Kavim* (The Man Who Spoke the Language of Jesus, 2006) and *Bab-ı Esrar* (The Dervish Gate, 2008) manifest an evident engagement with religious topics, religiosity, as well as Sufism. These novels may be conceived as exemplary of "post-secular fiction" in general (cf. McClure 2007) and "post-secular crime fiction" in particular (cf. Hansen 2014; 2011). If we consider the treatment of religion and spirituality in these novels, "a post-secular alternative taking shape in the space between traditional and religious discourses" (McClure 2007: 12) becomes evident. Although the studies of John A. McClure and Kim Toft Hansen, who have respectively proposed the aforementioned terms, are concerned with American and Scandinavian fiction, one can easily point at commonalities

6 For an elaborate discussion of contemporary trends in crime fiction, see the collection edited by Malcah Effron, *The Millennial Detective: Essays on Trends in Crime Fiction, Film and Television, 1990–2010*.

7 Mehtap Söyler, the author of *The Turkish Deep State: State Consolidation, Civil-Military Relations, and Democracy*, defines this notion as follows: "Deep state is associated with authoritarian, criminal and corrupt segments of the state that function in a democratic regime by exploiting and reproducing its deficiencies. At the same time, the deep state derives legitimacy from that political regime in exerting a coup threat, instigating military interventions, and committing organized crime and extrajudicial killings within the boundaries of the formal security apparatus. Perpetrators are held responsible for massive human rights violations ranging from massacres and assassinations to extrajudicial executions and disappearances" (2015: 1). In the following chapters, the deep state and the aforementioned issues will be tackled in more detail since they are closely linked with the aims of this thesis.

8 For an excellent analysis of the works of these two authors, see William J. Nichols's *Transatlantic Mysteries: Crime, Culture, and Capital in the "Noir Novels" of Paco Ignacio Taibo II and Manuel Vázquez Montalbán* (2011).

with Ümit's novels, written in a predominantly Muslim country. Thus, the claim can be made that within the global context of (world) literature, Ümit's novels share concerns and characteristics with many literary narratives which are part of "the globalized mediascape of contemporary popular culture" (Nilsson/Damrosch/D'haen 2017: 2). This brief comparative look into his fiction reveals that while closely following the global developments of genre, Ahmet Ümit does not shy away from experimenting, appropriating, and at times subverting the conventions of crime fiction for his own purposes.

While the form and content of Ümit's novels overtly reflect innovation, partially inspired by global tendencies in the genre of crime fiction, they are also nourished from the Turkish literary tradition. In several interviews, Ümit himself declares that he is influenced by authors such as Yaşar Kemal, Oğuz Atay and Yusuf Atılgan. By singling out these canonical authors as his literary influences, Ümit makes an implicit claim about his novels, and indeed about the genre in general, namely that they should not be conceived as lowbrow fiction.

In fact, Ahmet Ümit has been defending crime fiction in Turkey for many years, his battle cry being "*iyi polisiye iyi edebiyattır!*" (Good crime fiction is good literature). If we consider the denigrated position of this genre in Turkish literature in the 1990s when Ümit started writing, we can understand why today, as the most acclaimed author of the genre, Ümit makes a mission of its advocacy. Without a doubt, Ahmet Ümit has contributed to the genre's changing perception and reception in Turkey in the last decades. In other words, within the contemporary Turkish context, Ahmet Ümit has played a significant role in moving crime fiction from its earlier periphery position to its current one of popularity.

As in many parts of the world, today in Turkey, following Ahmet Ümit's lead, many authors have started writing crime novels. The Turkish Crime Writers' Association was founded in 2017.⁹ Numerous works of the youngest generation of crime writers are now being translated into other languages, and some have been awarded international literary prizes.¹⁰ Since 2015, an annual festival of crime fiction, Kara Hafta (Noir Week), is organized in Istanbul, gathering national and international authors of crime writing together. Moreover, there are a few literary journals on crime fiction, while others have dedicated special issues to the genre.¹¹ In sum, these trends are indicative of crime fiction, once mostly written under pseudonyms and considered lowbrow writing for many years, having now become a significant part of contemporary Turkish popular culture.

Despite the genre's remarkable development in Turkey, especially since the turn of the millennium, the academic study of crime writing is still, for the most part, in absence. Scholars of Turkish literature have neglected the genre, focusing instead on the works of

9 There are about forty authors (and scholars) of crime fiction listed as members of the Turkish Crime Writers' Association. It can be easily claimed that in post-2000 literature, an increasing number of young authors write crime fiction. Some of the notable contemporary authors of Turkish crime fiction can be listed as follows: Armağan Tunaboğlu, Alper Canigüz, Çağan Dikenelli, Verda Pars, Algan Sezgintüredi and Derviş Şentekin.

10 For instance, the novels of Emrah Serbes and Alper Canigüz have been translated into German and published by Binooki. In 2018, for his series of crime novels, which feature a five-year-old detective Alper Kamu, Alper Canigüz received the Litprom prize in the category of "Weltempfänger," which is awarded to international authors in order to promote their works in German-speaking countries.

11 *221B Dergi* and *Detektif Dergi* are two literary journals on crime fiction. In 2014, the renowned *Notos Journal* devoted its 46th issue to crime fiction and Ahmet Ümit was the guest editor of this special issue.

‘canonical’ or ‘elite’ writers. Crime fiction has, therefore, become one of the literary genres to have been pushed into the margins within Turkish literary studies due to the predominant interest in supposedly highbrow literature.¹² This is why in one of the rare academic conferences on crime fiction, held in 2012 at the Mimar Sinan University in Istanbul, at a time when there was already vivid public interest in it, crime fiction was marked as ‘the step-child of Turkish literature’.

Hence, it can be argued that even though contemporary Turkish crime fiction has caught up with *and* is part of the “international sphere of world literature” (Nilsson/Damrosch/D’haen 2017: 2), its scholarly inquiry in Turkey is far from reflecting the global academic interest in this genre.¹³ As a consequence, in spite of his indisputable fame in Turkey and rapidly increasing international recognition, notwithstanding a few exceptions, Ümit’s fiction has not yet been the subject of any comprehensive study.¹⁴

12 Along with crime fiction, popular historical novels, science fiction, fantasy and contemporary Islamic literature are exemplary genres and milieux, which are neglected by scholars of contemporary Turkish literature.

13 Due to the increasing number of volumes and manuscripts, articles, and symposiums devoted to the genre in various academic cultures, it is impossible to give here an all-inclusive list which would highlight the global academic interest in crime fiction. Among the (very) long list of recent studies on the genre, including those published by renowned publishing houses such Routledge and Palgrave Macmillan as well as university presses such as Cambridge and Oxford, the following selection only partially illustrates the wide ranging recent studies in crime fiction written in the English language: *Crime Fiction as World Literature* by Louise Nilsson, David Damrosch, and Theo D’haen (eds., 2017), Peter Swirski’s *American Crime Fiction: A Cultural History of Nobrow Literature as Art* (2016), Steven Peacock’s *Swedish Crime Fiction* (2014), Peter Messent’s *The Crime Fiction Handbook* (2013), John Scaggs’s *Crime Fiction* (2005), *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, edited by Martin Priestman (2003) and Gill Plain’s *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (2001). Additionally, there have been a number of studies that (claim to) explore international crime fiction. See, for instance, Vivien Miller and Helen Oakley (eds.) *Cross-Cultural Connections in Crime Fictions* (2012), Marieke Krajenbrink and Kate M. Quinn (eds.) *Investigating Identities; Questions of Identity in Contemporary International Crime Fiction* (2009), Christine Matzke (ed.) *Postcolonial Postmortems: Crime Fiction from a Transcultural Perspective* (2006), Marc Singer, Nels Pearson (eds.) *Detective Fiction in a Postcolonial and Transnational World* (2009), Jean Anderson, Miranda Carolina, Barbara Pezzotti (eds.) *The Foreign in International Crime Fiction: Transcultural Representations* (2012). Besides these volumes, a majority of monographs in English focus on Anglo-American crime fiction or crime novels from continental Europe, most notably France, Spain, Italy, and Scandinavia. See, for instance, Claire Gorrara’s *French Crime Fiction and the Second World War* (2012), Shelley Godsland’s *Killing Carmens: Women’s Crime Fiction from Spain* (2007), Barbara Pezzotti’s *Politics and Society in Italian Crime Fiction* (2014), Faye Stewart’s *German Feminist Queer Crime Fiction* (2014). Among many other studies, those that focus on the Middle East and Mediterranean crime fiction are particularly worth mentioning in this study. See, for instance, Börte Sagareer, Martin Strohmeier and Stephan Guth (eds.) *Crime Fiction in and around the Eastern Mediterranean* (2016) and Jonathan Smolin’s *Moroccan Noir: Police, Crime and Politics in Popular Culture* (2013). The only book-length study on Turkish crime fiction published in the English language is David Mason’s *Investigating Turkey: Detective Fiction and Turkish Nationalism* (2017); and in Turkey, the only book-length studies on the genre are Onur Bilge Kula’s *Yazınsal Yapıt ve Ahmet Ümit Nasıl Okunabilir?* (2016), Erol Üyepazarıcı’s *Korkmayınız Mister Sherlock Holmes* (2008), Seval Şahin’s *Kültürel Sermaye Kibar Hırsız ve Şehir* (2012) as well as her *Cinai Meseleler Osmanlı-Türk Polisiye Edebiyatında Biçim ve İdeoloji (1884–1928)* (2017); and a recent completion of articles presented in the first symposium on Turkish crime fiction *Edebiyatın İzinde: Polisiye Edebiyat*, edited by Seval Şahin, Banu Öztürk and Didem Ardalı-Büyükarman (2013).

14 Onur Bilge Kula’s manuscript, *Yazınsal Yapıt ve Ahmet Ümit Nasıl Okunabilir?* (2016) is the most