OttMed: Understanding the Mediterranean through comparative literature



C. Ceyhun Arslan
Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey

Hegel claimed that Europeans valued freedom and progress because they belonged to a maritime civilisation. In contrast, he believed that Islamic civilisations have failed to develop because their natural habitat is the desert. The Middle East still conjures up in one's imagination, arid lands. However, historical archives and literary texts tell another story. The Mediterranean has featured extensively in Ottoman texts such as the sixteenth-century work *Kitab-ı Bahriyye (The Book of Maritime Affairs)* by Piri Reis and nineteenth-century novels by Ahmet Midhat Efendi. The sea has evoked cosmopolitanism and imperial grandeur for the Ottoman cultural elite.

The project OttMed — Reassessing Late Ottoman Literatures within a Mediterranean Framework — generates new perspectives on the Mediterranean as it reads Arabic and Turkish literatures as a part of Mediterranean literatures. In particular, it provides an in-depth analysis of literary texts from diverse linguistic traditions such as French, Arabic, Spanish, Ottoman Turkish, and Karamanlı (Turkish written in Greek letters) that were written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Each text generates a particular representation of the Mediterranean and its history as it describes the region from one vantage point such as Malta, Spain, or Algeria. To further enrich the literary analysis, OttMed uses archival research and digital humanities techniques to map out travel itineraries of authors who composed these texts.

My project draws upon various fields such as postcolonial studies, world literature, and art history. The interdisciplinary character of my research allows me to examine issues that still shape the modern Mediterranean, such as exile, nostalgia, modernisation, and environmental crisis. Overall, by examining the Mediterranean from different angles that were not previously studied together, my work provides a more complex panorama of the sea and its basin.

The project focuses on the nineteenth-century because many authors reflected on the Mediterranean and its history when the region underwent significant political shifts. In particular, various historians have argued that the Mediterranean was strictly divided into its 'European' (Southern Europe) and 'non-European' (North Africa and the Middle East) parts due to the rise of nationalist movements. I demonstrate that literary works from this period feature cultural exchanges that undermine this divide. As the Mediterranean confronted an uncertain future due to sudden political changes, many thinkers wrote on the region's rich cultural exchanges throughout history. While the earlier research has already mapped out cultural, political, and knowledge networks of the Mediterranean in the nineteenth-century, I examine its 'imagined networks,' i.e. networks that feature in literary texts from different Mediterranean traditions.

My work builds upon numerous case studies, each providing a new and different angle on the Mediterranean. For example, I examine literary works on the Hagia Sophia to understand shifting perceptions of time and cultural heritage. My work then analyses the comparisons that Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq made between Maltese and Arabic languages to provide new insights into the relationship between language and cultural heritage. I also focus on how Ahmad Shawqi and Abdülhak Hamid Tarhan interpreted political events such as the Balkan Wars in their poems and plays on Andalusia (Muslim Spain). Other case studies include works on Alexandria, Algeria, Fes, and Marseilles from authors such as Gustave Flaubert, Abd al-Qadir al-Jazairi, Pierre Loti, and Constantine P. Cavafy. As my work examines representations of the Mediterranean and its history from different vantage points, it also pays attention to overlaps among these representations. I have conducted and presented research on these case studies in different countries such as China, Lebanon, and the USA. To disseminate OttMed's findings, I have written articles that are published or forthcoming in international peer-reviewed journals and finished a substantial portion of a book-length monograph.

My project makes three contributions. First, it provides new perspectives on the relationship between space and memory in the Mediterranean. Although scholars have studied this relationship before, they often describe places as belonging to one particular cultural community only. My project reveals how places such as Algeria and Alexandria are nodes of overlap for different literatures and historical trajectories. It also suggests new concepts to study the relationship between space and memory.

Second, my project proposes new categories for literary studies. Ottoman literature has often been studied either as the precursor of modern Turkish literature or as a part of Islamic Middle Eastern literatures. My project examines Ottoman literature as Mediterranean literature to map out cultural relations among diverse traditions. Thus, I demonstrate that characteristics of Arabic or Islamic literatures are often defining features of Spanish and Greek literatures as well.

Ultimately, OttMed calls for rethinking areas, such as Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East, that divide the world. In contrast to earlier research that has focused on national literatures and cultures, recent works in humanities study global cultural and literary networks. My project proposes that we shift our attention to areas such as the Mediterranean to study these networks. Works that study global cultural exchanges receive criticism due to their unattainable scope that causes researchers to overlook specific and important nuances in each cultural tradition. When researchers shift their attention to areas such as the Mediterranean for studying cultural networks, they set up a more feasible goal and see connections among geographical areas that were often thought to be incompatible.

SUMMARY

OttMed analyses Mediterranean literatures, with a focus on its Arabic, Ottoman, and French traditions, from the nineteenth-century. It chooses texts that describe the Mediterranean from different vantage points such as Malta or Alexandria. The project provides new perspectives on the relationship between space and memory in the Mediterranean. It also re-examines how we categorise literature and geography today.

PROJECT LEAD PROFILES

C. Ceyhun Arslan is a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions Fellow and Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature at Koç University, Turkey. He received his PhD from Harvard University, USA, in 2017. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in peer-reviewed journals such as Comparative Literature Studies, Middle Eastern Literatures, and Journal of Mediterranean Studies. He is currently working on two book-length monographs.

PROJECT PARTNERS

The OttMed project is based in the Department of Comparative Literature at Koç University, Istanbul. Collaboration partners included researchers from Germany, Italy, Lebanon, the USA, and beyond.

CONTACT DETAILS

C. Ceyhun Arslan

Koç University, College of Social Sciences and Humanities, SOS 142 Sarıyer, Istanbul, Turkey

+90 212 338 0929

cceyhunarslan@ku.edu.tr

https://cssh.ku.edu.tr/egitim/karsilastirmali-edebiyat/akademik-kadro/show/cceyhunarslan/

FUNDING

This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 795465.