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## Series Review. YARATILAN (CREATURE, Çağan Irmak, Netflix, TR 2023): The Ottoman Frankenstein

2024

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/23503>

Veröffentlichungsversion / published version

Rezension / review

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Darıcı, Sefer; Gencer, Zekiye Tamer: Series Review. YARATILAN (CREATURE, Çağan Irmak, Netflix, TR 2023): The Ottoman Frankenstein. In: *Journal for Religion, Film and Media*, Jg. 10 (2024), Nr. 2, S. 145–148. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/23503>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

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## Series Review

# YARATILAN (CREATURE, Çağın Irmak, Netflix, TR 2023)

## The Ottoman Frankenstein

It seems as if all of Türkiye is talking about YARATILAN (CREATURE, Çağın Irmak, Netflix, TR 2023), an adaptation of Mary Shelley's cult novel *Frankenstein*, one of the masterpieces of Gothic literature. The series, which was released on Netflix on 20 October 2023, is set in Bursa and Istanbul during the last period of the Ottoman Empire. Director Çağın Irmak's adaptation, which does not have many examples in Türkiye, brought the theme of – as he calls it – “the loneliness of the created” to its audience from a novel perspective. Beyond being based on the novel, the series skilfully handles a chain of events in the Ottoman Empire, the culture of the period, the relationships of daily life, and religious motifs. Although there is an enormous audience in Türkiye, domestic productions of fantasy and science fiction have not been especially successful, probably because their myths, legends, dialogue, and visual scenes have few roots in the culture of Türkiye.

Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus*, published in 1818, has inspired many plays and films. The extended title “The Modern Prometheus” is revealing. Prometheus is a titan from mythology who creates humankind, determines its destiny, and stands by humankind against the cruel gods; he gives the fire he steals from Olympus to humankind to make it superior to all other beings and to give humankind divine power.<sup>1</sup> This mythological power struggle between humans and gods is found in Shelley's novel in the character of Frankenstein. The novel *Frankenstein* and the characters Frankenstein and his monster are now an element of the cult gothic, science fiction, and horror genres. In various productions, *Frankenstein* has been a vehicle for exploration of the limits of the arrogance of humankind

1 Hacımüftüoğlu 2018.

when it encounters technology and science, or for a quest for immortality, or for a search for love and compassion behind the seemingly abhorrent.

In an interview with the *Altyazı* film magazine, director Çağan Irmak noted the disjuncture between the Frankenstein legacy in cinema and the original book.

So far, only Kenneth Branagh has made a complete adaptation of the book. The series created is the second adaptation in this sense. But of course I changed a lot of things, I changed the heroes. I turned it into a more grounded fantasy, to be closer to human beings. I wanted to tell more about people. You won't see such creatures, you won't see a completely fantastic world. There is a life there. There is a struggle between two people, one of whom is pushed out of society, and one of whom is trying to prove himself, and whose intelligence is gushing out of his body.<sup>2</sup>

The series – eight episodes with an average duration of 40 minutes – stars Taner Ölmez as Ziya and Erkan Koçak Köstendil as İhsan. Ziya travels to Istanbul hoping to become a doctor, a dream he has had since childhood, because his father is a doctor and because his mother died of cholera. Even before he leaves for Istanbul, he has been searching for a book known as *Kitab-ı Kiyam* (The Book of Kiyam). The Turkish Language Institution defines *Kiyam* as “to attempt something, to rise up and revolt”.<sup>3</sup> In Islamic belief, *kıyam* is resurrection after death. The posture *kıyam* refers to standing in prayer, a pivotal act for Muslims, and is a sign of respect, obedience, and devotion to Allah. In the Qur'an, verse 218 of the Surah Ash-Shuara states, “He sees you when you do qiyam.” In the series, the term is understood in light of rebellion and resurrection. The book, which guides the characters throughout the series, maintains that death can be reversed. When Ziya arrives in Istanbul, where he continues his search for the book, misfortune haunts him and he is left penniless and homeless. Undeterred, he enrolls in the medical faculty. He meets the doctor İhsan, a friend of his father, who studied medicine in France and is very intelligent, knowledgeable, and successful but has unusual ideas. Dismissed from teaching because his innovative ideas do not fit with traditional methods, İhsan is lonely. Ziya finds İhsan's unusual stance similar to his own and tries in various ways to work with him.

2 Ildır 2023; The interview was conducted in Turkish; translation into English by the authors.

3 <https://sozluk.gov.tr/> [accessed 17 January 2023].

Both science and religion acknowledge that death awaits every human being. Ziya, however, cannot not accept that his beloved mother had to experience death. In Islamic belief, death is a transition to another dimension, from the world of martyrdom to the Hereafter. As life continues in a new dimension, death is not the end.<sup>4</sup> Talk of resurrection implies a return to life after death.<sup>5</sup> In the series, the *Kitab-ı Kiyam* is a guide to this resurrection. İhsan does not share Ziya's extreme ideas about immortality. However, at Ziya's insistence İhsan becomes a partner in the younger man's plans and his idea of deification. They conduct various experiments and while trying to bring back a dead person, İhsan is struck by lightning. Unable to accept İhsan's death, Ziya uses the information in *Kitab-ı Kiyam* to bring him back. At first Ziya is elated by this miracle, but then he realises that the outcome is in fact a failure. İhsan, who behaves like a newborn baby, is left to his fate by Ziya, who flees Istanbul.

Ziya runs away from his responsibility for this creature. İhsan is thus betrayed by the only person he trusts, who created him just as Dr Frankenstein created his monster. İhsan only gradually regains his memory. He finds a place in the circus, where people like him are marginalised from society. Marked by burn scars on his face, he again encounters the evil of human-kind. He falls in love and takes refuge in a village but still cannot escape human evil. Director Çağan Irmak's assesses the evil at the core of human beings in light of İhsan's gains importance:

İhsan's journey after he is created is a story about human evil. İhsan, as in the book, is born like a baby, but then becomes evil as people do evil. What do we expect from a human being in life? To be born, to grow up, to learn, to fall in love, right? We expect these things. I made İhsan experience all of these in his second life, on that journey. As he says, "It's impossible to be good where there are people", that whole journey was to explain that.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps one of the most important elements of the series is its relevance to culture and belief systems. Irmak notes that the series reflects many faith-based narratives around, for example, hell and the moment of death, as well as containing references to speech and behaviour as taught and expected

4 İlhan/Işıkdöğün 2023.

5 Durmaz 2022.

6 Ildır 2023.

in society. The Islamic faith depicts life in terms of its character before and after death. Human beings, who are subjected to a divine test in this world, will be rewarded or punished<sup>7</sup> in the Hereafter in light of their beliefs and behaviour, which hangs over their pre-death existence in the world. In the series, human anxiety about the reward that is paradise and about avoiding the punishment that is hell is played out through İhsan, who, for example, sees hell and fears its demons. İhsan hopes his second chance will allow him to be rewarded after death.

The realism of so much in the series, from its visual effects to the behaviour of its protagonists, encourages its audience to embrace the series in light of the familiarity of its basic message. The immediacy of the story and its performance are significant reasons for the series' success in Türkiye. The filming locations reflect the conditions of the period very effectively. Experts have worked as consultants to ensure the accuracy of period clothes, speech, and behaviours. One of İhsan's most resonant lines reflects his search for love, which he finds in the barn of the village house where he took shelter: "I was given a second chance in my life." The director sends a subtle message to his audience – not everyone gets a second chance to live. The series, which has been well received for both its presentation and its adaptation of *Frankenstein*, is a pioneer in Türkiye for this genre. It shows that a global story can resonate with a local or national audience when it is subtly, sensitively, and carefully adapted.

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## Filmography

YARATILAN (Created by: Çağan Irmak, Netflix, TR 2023).

7 Salmazzem 2022.