

Healing in Words:

Medicine, History and Healing Practices in the Late Ottoman Empire

Ayşegül Ersin

Abstract: In the 19th century, as multicultural empires disintegrated and nation-state consciousness emerged, the Ottoman Empire embarked on a path of Westernization while Europe grappled with new uprisings. Following the 1848 uprisings, defeated Hungarian and Polish soldiers who had rebelled against the Habsburgs fled to the Ottoman Empire. As one of the soldiers, Adolf Farkas converted to Islam and began a new life in Istanbul. His daughter, Nigâr Hanım became a renowned poet and kept a diary for nearly 30 years, documenting daily life in Istanbul and shedding light on new legislation, particularly in medical history.

Keywords: Ottoman medicine history, modernization, diary writing, Ottoman Muslim women.

Ayşegül Ersin After specializing in linguistics and literature at Anadolu University in Türkiye, she began her doctoral studies in the Department of History at the University of Szeged in Hungary, supported by a four-year doctoral grant. Her dissertation investigates nineteenth-century Ottoman intellectual life and the 1848 revolutions, analyzing these transformations through the life of an Ottoman woman poet and the European dimensions of her family history. Prior to her PhD, she contributed to projects dedicated to producing modern Turkish editions of old literary works by literary critics and Ottoman women writers, a scholarly experience that significantly informed her current research trajectory. She is currently pursuing her research at the Department of Near Eastern Studies, Turkish Studies, at the University of Vienna, supported by an Ernst Mach Research Grant. Her research interests include intellectual history, history of medicine, women's studies, and migration. She engages with sources in Turkish, German, and Hungarian and also teaches Turkish as a foreign language."

Contact: aysglersn@gmail.com

1. Introduction

The late Ottoman period was a time of profound transformation, shaped by modernization efforts, shifting cultural paradigms, and the emergence of women's rights movements. Within this dynamic context, Nigâr Hanım emerged as a celebrated poet who straddled tradition and modernity. As the daughter of a well-educated father who fled to the Ottoman Empire from Europe as a soldier in the Hungarian army and a traditionally domestic mother, Nigâr Hanım's perspective bridges contrasting worlds, offering a multifaceted account of her era. While her personal narrative has been studied for its literary, social and cultural values, its connection to the history of medicine remains underexplored.

This paper is structured into three chapters that examine Nigâr Hanım's life, literary identity, and contributions to the Ottoman women's movement, while also exploring her role that has been largely overlooked in medical history. The first chapter situates her within the broader context of the late Ottoman modernization project, highlighting her diaries and role in the emerging women's movement, as well as laying the foundation for her involvement in medical history. The second chapter delves into the political interactions between nations that influenced modernization and medical practices, focusing on her father's immigration story and the impact of the 1848–1849 Hungarian immigrants on Ottoman intellectual life. It also provides an overview of Ottoman medical history, considering both traditional and modern healing practices. The final chapter analyzes concrete examples from Nigâr Hanım's diaries to demonstrate how traditional and modern medical practices intersected in her daily life, as well as emphasizing her significant role in the Ottoman women's movement and her contributions to medical history as a woman, patient, and caregiver.

2. Nigâr Hanım: A Poetess Bridging Cultures and Eras

As an important poet in the emergence of modern Turkish poetry, Nigâr Hanım (Nigâr binti Osmanî, 1856-1918) lived during a time of major political, economic and social changes in the late Ottoman period. Her father—a soldier who participated in the Hungarian War of Independence of 1848—arrived in the Ottoman Empire as a refugee after their defeat and later converted to Islam. He earned a strong reputation in the state, attaining the title of Pasha and married a Turkish woman.

Nigâr Hanım was born in Istanbul. At the age of seven, her father enrolled her in a French school where she learned French, Italian, Greek, and Armenian. However, she had to leave the school at the age of eleven due to veiling restrictions (Bekiroğlu, 2011: p. 45). She later received private Turkish, Arabic, Persian, and German courses at home (2011: p. 241). Despite her father's opposition, social pressures forced her to marry at a very young age. She had three sons, but her unhappy marriage ended in divorce (2011: p. 80).

From the beginning of her literary career, Nigâr Hanım attracted attention not only within Ottoman borders but also in Europe, particularly in Hungary, due to her father's origins. Her name was widely recognized in Hungarian media and journals, as well as among Hungarian Turkologists with an interest in Turkish folk culture. Prominent periodicals, literary history essays, and anthologies of the time highlighted her life and literary endeavors. Hungarian newspapers and journals depicted her as the first harem lady encountered by Europeans, since numerous Europeans attended her literary saloon meetings, and as one of the first feminists in the Ottoman Empire.

Nigâr Hanım published literary works from 1887 until her death, including poems, stories, plays, essays, articles, and letters. Her published works include *Efsus I-II* (What a Pity!, 1886) [poetry], *Nîrân* (Fiery Poems, 1896), *Aks-i Sadâ* (Echo, 1900) [poetry], *Elhân-ı Vatan* (Voices of the Country, 1916) [poetry], *Hayatımın Hikâyesi* (Story of My Life, 1909), *Safahât-i Kalb* (Phases of the Heart, 1901) [love letters], *Tesir-i Aşk* (The Effect of Love, 1883) [play], and *Grive* (The Hill, 1910) [play]. Her diaries—comprising eighteen notebooks from 1887 to 1918—are among the most important documents of the era, offering a detailed account of daily life in Istanbul as experienced by a female subject before and during World War I.

2.1. Chronicle of Healing and Self-Discovery: The Diaries of Nigâr Hanım

Nigâr Hanım's diaries can be viewed as a life-long experiment testing the possibilities of her ability to heal, improve, and represent herself. From the age of 25 to 56, she continued writing. For her, the diary writing was a meditative, record-keeping experience with profound psychological, intellectual, and aspirational significance. The diaries cover a discontinuous period of 31 years within her 56-year lifespan. Comprising eighteen notebooks, the entries are classified into two distinct volumes in their new publication using the Latin letter alphabet.¹ The first volume comprises her early diaries (1887–1890), spanning three years and three and a half months. The second volume encompassing her later diaries (1894–1918) documents seven years and three months. These timelines suggest that her writing was not continuous but occurred during specific periods.

The structure of the diaries is partially chronological, with her initial entry including a summary of her life, titled *Mukadderat* (Fate), which broadens the context of the diaries. Although the entries are organized into notebooks, partly numbered by her and later her sons,

¹ Şair Nigâr Hanım. (2021). *Günlük, 24 Ocak 1887 - 14 Nisan 1890 Cilt I* [The Diary, January 24, 1887 - April 14, 1890 Volume I]. Istanbul: Timaş Press. Şair Nigâr Hanım. (2023). *Günlük, 20 Ocak 1894 - 19 Mart 1918 Cilt II* [The Diary, January 20, 1894 - March 19, 1918 Volume II]. Istanbul: Timaş Press.

there are significant gaps totaling 21 years. However, her sons preserved the diaries, some of which were later published as *Hayatımın Hikâyesi* (The Story of My Life) in 1959, while Bekiroğlu's monograph further contextualized them for public audiences in 1998.

The diary consistently begins with phrases such as “yesterday” or “this morning,” suggesting that it was written almost daily. Composing diary entries in the privacy of her room before retiring for the night appears to have been an integral part of her daily routine, much like reading a book every evening. She wrote her diaries in Ottoman Turkish using Arabic script, but French words and proper nouns were frequently written in Latin script within the text. This stylistic choice reflects both her multilingual proficiency and the influence of modernization during the late Ottoman period, as French and Latin-derived vocabulary became increasingly integrated into intellectual and literary circles in the nineteenth century.

2.2. Situating Nigâr Hanım in the Ottoman Women's Movement

The late Ottoman period witnessed the emergence of the women's movement, reflecting varying approaches to addressing women's rights and roles in society. In this context, the Ottoman women's movement has been analyzed within certain categorical frameworks. Nicone van Os categorizes the ideologies behind the movement into radical feminism and familial feminism (2001: p. 335). While radical feminists, rooted in the ideals of the French Enlightenment, sought to dismantle fundamental gender inequalities and advocate for transformative societal change, familial feminists embraced the patriarchal structure while striving to elevate women's status within it, drawing on religious revival movements (von Os, 2001: p. 336). This dual framework serves as a critical foundation for analyzing Nigâr Hanım's position within the Ottoman women's movement, specifically as a familial feminist who emphasized domestic and familial roles.

On the other hand, Zihniöğlu identifies the pioneer women of the Ottoman Empire as representing “first-wave feminism,” defining them as aristocratic or ruling-class leaders who contributed to the emergence of women's ideals during the late Ottoman period (2003: p. 52). According to her periodization, Nigâr Hanım can be placed among the women of the first women's awakening and the Second Constitutional and National Defence periods. Nigâr Hanım also worked as a writer and translator for *Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete*² (Newspaper for Ladies), a prominent Ottoman women's newspaper. Her primary concerns included supporting educational opportunities for women and opposing polygamy, which are also evident themes in her diaries.

The diary she kept with her father's encouragement provides significant insights into the evolving consciousness of womanhood and the women's activities during this period. It mentions the establishment of some women's associations during wartime, along with new educational opportunities for women and their growing involvement in newly founded journals. In addition to illustrating these themes with specific examples from the diary, I aim to highlight the poet's subjectivity within the medical context.

² See Meltem Güler and Hasan Çelik's article on how the newspaper produced and disseminated knowledge and commodities within the context of modernization by considering fashion and consumer culture: (2023) “Osmanlı'da Modernleşme, Kamusal Alan ve Kadın: Toplumsal Değişimi ‘Hanımlara Mahsus Gazete’yle Okumak” [“Modernization, Public Sphere, and Women in the Ottoman Empire: Reading Social Change with the ‘Newspaper for Ladies’”], in *bilig*, no. 107, pp. 127-160, <https://doi.org/10.12995/bilig.10705>.

3. The Multicomponent Structure of the Modernization Era: Medical and Historical Crossroads

During the Ottoman modernization, the empire adopted numerous innovations from Europe. In this context, the Hungarian War of Independence and the political ties between the Ottoman Empire and Hungary during this period significantly contributed to Ottoman modernization and its intellectual landscape. Hungarian soldiers who were integrated into various institutions, most notably military academies, played an important role in spreading European-style living and scientific knowledge, which gradually began to permeate Ottoman society. Due their importance at both the political and a cultural level, they became the subject of numerous academic studies. Within this broader framework, Nigâr Hanım's family history and her life offer a better understanding of the components of modernization, including the transformation of Ottoman medical science, which was shaped by Western practices.

3.1. Looking for Traces of Family History: The Hungarian Independence War and Its Relation to Ottoman Modernization

The Habsburg Empire faced substantial obstacles in the nineteenth century due to its multicultural structure, dominated by Germans, with significant Italian, Hungarian, Croat, and Serb minorities (Taylor, 1981: 29). Liberal and national movements, including the Hungarian War of Independence (1848–1849), posed a serious threat to the empire. Led by Kossuth Lajos, this uprising was initially successful but was ultimately suppressed with Russian assistance (Nazır, 2016: 24). After the defeat, many high-ranking officers and civilians fled to the Ottoman borders. Those who converted to Islam and remained in Istanbul in the following years played significant roles in the empire's cultural and ideological transformation (Karpat, 2002: 172).

Nigâr Hanım's father Adolf Farkas was one of the soldiers who converted to Islam and settled in Istanbul. Following his conversion to Islam, he became known as "Hungarian Osman Bey" or "Hungarian Osman Pasha" (Bekiroğlu, 2011: p. 30). He appeared loyal to the tenets of Islam, which he embraced willingly (2011: p. 32).

After the Crimean War, Farkas married to Emine Rifati Hanım, a traditional Ottoman woman (Bekiroğlu, 2011. p:37). Being a traditional Ottoman woman typically implied adherence to cultural norms centered on domestic life, modesty, and the preservation of Ottoman-Islamic values. Nigâr Hanım's upbringing and role reflected an Eastern worldview rooted in tradition and family life. This dynamic went in harmony with her father's Western-oriented mindset, creating a unique familial environment. Their union deeply influenced their daughter's identity, positioning her as a bridge between modern ideals and traditional values. They had a son who died at a very young age, and a daughter, Nigâr Hanım. In 1870, Adolf Farkas began teaching at the Ottoman Military School,³ where he remained for the rest of his life.

3.2. Examining the Progression of Ottoman Medical History: Traditions, Transformations, and Intersections

The Ottoman medical history is likewise based on a long history. The empire's traditional medicine developed under the influence of numerous cultures and created a system of

³ For detailed information on Ottoman history of science and military schools that developed under Western influence, see: *The Last Episode in Islamic Scientific Tradition and the Beginning of European Scientific Tradition Science, Technology and Industry in the Ottoman World*, ed. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, Ahmed Djebbar and Feza Günergun. Proceedings of the XXth International Congress of History of Science (Liège, 20-26 July 1997).

practices where each component could coexist within it, even though Islamic tradition was highly powerful (Boyar, 2018: p. 214). This interplay between “Islamic medicine” and “Ottoman medicine” can be understood through their shared roots and evolution. It has been discussed that Ottoman medicine literature with a reference to the Seljuk legacy emphasizes its foundation as an Islamic, orient, and scholastic tradition while highlighting the influence of Western practices (Boyar, 2018; İhsanoğlu, 2004). Given the synthetic structure of its traditions, it was noted that Ottoman science initially drew inspiration from the medieval Islamic scientific tradition but evolved uniquely, becoming a bridge between Islamic and European scientific practices (İhsanoğlu, 2004: p. 11). This dual influence shaped Ottoman medicine into a distinctive blend of Islamic foundations and Western innovations.

In the early modern period of the Ottoman Empire, medicine had multiple compatible subfields such as other traditional medical systems. These subfields were folkloristic popular medicine, mechanistic Greek medicine, and Muslim religious medicine (Afacan, 2010: p. 20). Popular folk medicine, sanctioned by custom and consensus, encompassed a diverse range of traditions that blended inherited Central Asian shamanistic practices with Turkish heritage and incorporated elements from Hellenic Anatolia, the Christian Balkans, and indigenous Arab folklore (Shefer, 2016: 3048). The humoral theory, a Greek medical concept, emphasized the balance of four bodily fluids "lood", "phlegm", "black bile", and "yellow bile", corresponding to air, water, earth, and fire, respectively, and influenced Ottoman medicine (Afacan, 2010, p. 21). There was a requirement for a significant balance among these bodily humors. The last is Muslim religious medicine, known as "al-tibb al-nabawi" or "Prophetic medicine". In Islam, the authority of religious medicine comes not from tradition or scholarly texts, but from its consistency with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, and it is regarded as validated by his sayings (Shefer, 2016: p. 3049).

Along with other fields, the Tanzimat reforms⁴ led to institutional changes in medicine, marked by the coexistence of traditional healing techniques and the gradual adoption of modern remedies. The aim was to modernize medical systems, including the restructuring of medical education and institutions, as well as the incorporation of public health into state agendas. Although hospitals were established across the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, construction stopped in the eighteenth century and later resumed with elite support, adopting a modern medical approach focused on biology and pathology rather than holistic methods (Shefer, 2009: p. 20). However, the accessibility of medical practices in the empire significantly varied as learned medicine was available to urban elites, while common people relied on simpler, affordable remedies (Shefer, 2009: p. 24). As a member of the Ottoman elite, Nigâr Hanım had access to all available practices. Examples from her diaries reflecting the way she combined modern medical knowledge and simple traditional remedies will be discussed in the following chapter.

4. Health, Healing, and Womanhood in Transition: Nigâr Hanım’s Diaries Amidst Medical Modernization and Wartime

The transition period in the Ottoman Empire is strongly reflected in the healing practices recorded in the poet’s diary, offering unique insights into the interplay between traditional and modern medical treatments. Her experiences shed light on the often invisible role of women in Ottoman medical history. As a signifier of the modernization period, Nigâr Hanım

⁴ The Tanzimat reforms were a series of political, legal, and social reforms in the Ottoman Empire between 1839 and 1876 aimed at modernizing the state and securing equality for all its subjects.

referred to her diaries as “Jurnalim” [my journal] in French. This concept aligns with the idea that the diary serves as a “book of (my) life,” acting as both a personal account and a defense against the erasure of one’s existence, as diarists often transform their lives into text, creating lasting traces of their being (Paperno, 2004: p. 563). Moreover, she described the pages of her diaries as the “ecza” of her life (Vol II: p. 33), a term in Arabic that signifies both “pieces” and “medication” in a medical context. This perception enables interpreting her diaries as healing fragments that she created through the act of journaling, suggesting that recovery was one of the motivations for writing during this period.

The opening pages of the diary appear to capture intense emotions, particularly deep sadness, which often seems to provoke crying jags. These episodes may be linked to nervous system conditions such as hysteria, neurasthenia, or melancholia. In her comprehensive study on Ottoman mental health, Kılıç highlights two types of sadness proposed by the Muslim philosopher Belhi: acknowledged sadness and unacknowledged sadness, the latter thought to result from abnormal blood flow in the body (2023: p. 60). Nigâr Hanım’s melancholy seems to dominate her diary so strongly that it is difficult to determine whether her sadness caused physical pain, or, conversely, whether the pain triggered her profound emotional distress. At times, her reflections suggest a subtle oscillation between the two, hinting at the complex interplay of body and mind in her lived experience.

An opening entry in the diary from 1894 appears to illustrate her ongoing effort to understand her scattered feelings and mood swings. Through the act of writing, she seems to begin confronting the emotional turmoil surrounding her first major conflict: being married at the age of eleven. She describes this period as a loss of self-confidence and the beginning of a never-ending sense of incompleteness in life (Vol II: p. 32). Married against her will, Nigâr Hanım seems to gradually perceive her husband as indifferent and uninterested in her, particularly as she grows older and becomes more aware of her circumstances. Over time, she falls in love with her husband, even though their marriage eventually ends, despite her attempts to tolerate his emotional distance for the sake of their children.

Nigâr Hanım enters a vicious cycle in which she constantly conflicts with herself and questions her life choices, likely as a result of the sadness and melancholy stemming from a lonely existence. Since this questioning is so sharp that it disrupts her daily life, she turns to intellectual and creative pursuits such as playing the piano, reading novels, crafting poems, miniature-making, and some handicraft works to forget her emotional suffering as a form of therapy.

Her diaries not only reflect the therapeutic role of journaling but also provide insights into the poet’s own struggles with physical illness, which played a significant role in her writing. Along with her general state of nervous fragility, Nigâr Hanım suffered from various physical diseases, such as bronchitis, chronic stomach pain and enteritis, periostitis, recurrent somatic pains, blood diseases, gynecological diseases, influenza, and finally typhus, which led to her death. Additionally, the illnesses experienced by family members and acquaintances are also documented, such as high fever, gastritis, pharyngitis, smallpox, dental pains, heart disease, epidemic diseases such as dengue fever, and some specific Turkish folk diseases. Günergun’s study on the diseases prevalent during that time in the capital medical city of Istanbul is an important source to understand the prevalence of the diseases mentioned in the diary. Many of the most common diseases appear in the diary, such as pulmonary diseases, and gastro-intestinal diseases, illustrated with the medical statistics in the newspapers published in Istanbul during these years (Günergun, 2001: p. 174).

4.1. Diaries with the Lens of Traditional Healing Practices: Folk Medicine, the Influence of Islamic Beliefs, and Greek-Inspired Treatments

In examining the role of women in historical medical practices, it appears that female healers often played a crucial part in community health, bridging domestic knowledge and popular remedies. In pre-Islamic Turkish culture, popular medical customs described the involvement of women who were involved in the preparing and selling herbal remedies (Sarı, 1996: p. 22). Among these practices, herbal treatments, sometimes referred to as 'witches' brew' and tied to long-standing medical traditions held a particularly prominent role. In the context of Ottoman popular medicine, women likely participated effectively as healers. Nigâr Hanım's diaries, for instance, suggest that linden tea was a common remedy for bronchitis pains and stomach ailments (Vol. II: p. 209). Moreover, although the illness was not specifically mentioned, the grape cure was part of Nigâr Hanım's morning routine (Vol. I: p. 325), hinting at the continuity of these popular medical practices in her daily life.

Nigâr Hanım uses *diethyl ether*, referred to as *lokman ruhu*⁵, for sleep problems caused by mood swings, which she expresses with the term "excitée", particularly during the winter months (Vol II: p. 163). As a compound dating back to the 8th century, diethyl ether's effects were noticed outside the laboratory in the West until the 19th century, and it was subsequently employed to treat labor pains. *Chloroform* entered the medical world in 1831 as a more effective anesthetic chemical (Whalen, Bacon, and Smith, 2005: p. 325). Both of these anesthetic chemicals, commonly used during this period, are mentioned in Nigâr Hanım's diaries.

Another chemical noted in the diary was *katran ruhu* "creosote", used for persistent toothache (Vol. I: p. 157). Additionally, the preparation of *sedliç* is also recorded as a treatment method. Based on lexicological studies, *sedliç* referred to Seidlitz powders in German (Aktaş, 2007: p. 5). These powders, which were popular in Europe at the time, were adopted into Ottoman life. Eventually, they were used as a folkloristic treatment, prepared at home with mineral water. Nigâr Hanım drank *sedliç* with lemon and carbonate to relieve stomach gas (Vol. II: pp. 117, 169).

The diaries also include references to Turkish folk medical healing practices, reflecting the influence of Islamic belief and traditional superstitious. When the doctors' treatments are insufficient, they turn to folk healers such as *gelincikçi* (poppy healers) and practices including *kurşun dökme* (lead casting).

Nigâr Hanım relies on deep contemplation as a form of therapy and meditation in practicing the philosophical and metaphysical dimensions of healing practices. The act of thinking, encouraged by numerous verses in the Qur'an, was central to Islamic intellectual tradition (DîA/Encyclopedia of Islam, 1994). For Nigâr Hanım, contemplation or *tefekür*, seems to have served as a pathway to knowledge, personal healing, and closer connection to divine during difficult times. On October 16, 1887, Nigâr Hanım wrote:

"I thought by now. Undoubtedly, Allah gave us the power of thinking to protect us in our loneliness. At least my dreams that accompanied me in my corner, where I reach Allah, be stay with me." (Vol. I: p. 197)

⁵ "Diethyl ether", which is used among Turkish people as "lokman ruhu" (the soul of Lokman) stems from Lokman Hakîm, who has been known since the pre-Islamic Arab society. In the Turkic-Islamic world, "hakîm/wise", softened into "hekim/doctor", resulting in Lokman Hakîm being turned into Lokman Hekim in folk culture. There are many opinions about him in the medical world, it is also said that his name is a reflection of pronunciation of the German physician Friedrich Hoffmann's name, who introduced the use of ether as a drug. See Intepe, N., & Er, F. (2014). Lokman Hekim Gerçek Kişi midir, Kültür müdür? [Did Lokman Hakim Really Live or Is He a Cult of Sorts?]. In: Mersin Üniversitesi Tıp Fakültesi Lokman Hekim Tıp Tarihi Ve Folklorik Tıp Journal, 4(2), pp. 27-31.

She frequently expresses her engagement in contemplation, writing phrases such as “I just stayed, started to think. I thought. I thought” (Vol. I: p. 58), “I only thought” (Vol. I: p. 66), “I only thought until after midnight” (Vol. I: p. 100), “I thought for quite a while” (Vol. I: p. 152), “I went to the seaside and only thought” (Vol. I: p. 319), and “I had many sad and distressed thoughts” (Vol. I: p. 339). Nigâr Hanım believes that pain and suffering were part of life, and enduring them with prayer was the only way to recover. When her mother’s illness could not be resolved by doctors, she prayed:

“I beseech the Almighty to, in His infinite grace and mercy, show compassion for this situation and grant my mother well-being, and never let me experience the absence of my parents... My Allah; have mercy on a helpless subject who is unable to endure the sorrowful afflictions of a hopeless heart... Have pity on me... No one can help but You...” (Vol. I: p. 339)

Besides contemplation and praying, hacamat (phlebotomy) with dried horn appears as a doctor’s recommendation for chronic back pain (Vol. I: p. 234). Phlebotomy, endorsed by the Prophet and grounded in humoral theory, was widely practiced for its believed curative and preventive functions, aiming to restore humoral balance and treat ailments caused by excess or corrupted blood through various methods (Afacan, 2010: p. 25). Moreover, in Muslim religious medicine, clerics predominated as curatives and suffering was a purifying element, thereby conveying it as a coveted religious virtue (Afacan, 2010: p. 22). When doctors were deemed insufficient, Nigâr Hanım’s mother wanted to consult a cleric or visit one.

Rooted in Greek-inspired healing methods, diet played a central role in treatments, and Nigâr Hanım meticulously adhered to planned dietary habits throughout her life. Doctors usually advised a strict diet in addition to drugs. Even in the case of a simple fever, a suitable diet was immediately applied with the doctor’s instructions. One of the specific diets mentioned is the *suralimentation* (overeating) method that the doctors advised after her surgeries, which had a positive effect on her health (Vol. II: p. 61). Soup and boiled eggs were the doctor’s dietary prescription for gastritis and fever (Vol. I: p. 293). Since she suffered from stomach problems throughout her life, she expresses that it was impossible to eat anything other than rice soup, tea, and French bread (Vol. II: p. 115). In the diary, dietary habits were always expressed as the partial solution that could cure illnesses.

Another treatment method frequently used by Nigâr Hanım for her well-being and illnesses was *bathing*. Therapeutic approaches included *foot baths*, *cold compresses*, *hydrotherapy*, *thermal therapy*, *herbal lotions*, *massages*, and friction (Vol. II: pp. 72, 87, 106, 114, 210).

4.2. New Medicine Techniques and the Diary: New Tools, Treatments, and Physicians

Particularly during this era, the Ottoman Empire’s pursuit of scientific advancement in line with Europe, the influx of new chemicals, medicines, and tools from Europe, and the arrival of invited doctors contributed to the new healing practices to the traditional ones. These developments was mostly available to elites and can also be traced in the diary.

Nigâr Hanım’s experiences with various illnesses and her resilience through traditional methods were accompanied by the introduction of new medicines, chemicals, tools, and treatment methods. Although specific medication names rarely appear in her diary, she used aspirin, new supplements, lozenges, and other drugs prescribed by doctors and introduced by nurses who visited her family home (Vol. I: pp. 69, 81, 149, 209, 240). These medicines were

often obtained from newly opened pharmacies in Istanbul, including Zanni Pharmacy (Vol. I: p. 240).

Specific entries about new chemical compounds such as *iodine tincture* and *spirit* for dental use are documented in the diary (Vol. II: p.108). *Quinine* frequently appeared as her preferred remedy for body aches and colds, helping her sleep while experiencing headaches, malaise, and sweating spells (Vol. II: p. 154). By the 18th century, quinine had become a popular treatment for fever in Tunisia—then within Ottoman borders—after extensive discussions between Tunisian and European doctors (Boyar, 2018 pp: 224–225).

When conventional treatment methods failed to cure Nigâr Hanım's mother's chronic ailments, her father brought a *homeopathic doctor* to provide care at home (Vol. I: p. 362). As a holistic method, *homeopathy* was based on the principle of treating a disease by administering very low doses of the substances that cause the illness (Aslan, 2013: p. 48).

Her diaries also mention medical devices such as the *reaumur thermometer* for measuring fever (Vol. I: p. 391). It was known as one of the most standardized thermometers in Europe, particularly in France at the time (Gauvin, 2012: p. 516). Another medical tool was a *passery* for Nigâr Hanım's gynecological treatment, just before her hysterectomy operation in Vienna (Vol I. p: 412). Her medical experiences in Vienna will be explored in a subsequent section to contextualize her engagement with modern medical practices.

Nigâr Hanım's financial status and European origins facilitated her access to both local and European doctors. In her diary, she frequently mentions visiting doctors, including those from Europe and America who contributed to Ottoman medicine. One notable physician in the diary is *Doctor Zamboco Pasha*, recognized by his colleagues as "the first leprologist of the Orient" (Günergun, 2001: p. 187). As a reliable doctor at the time, Nigâr Hanım often visited him and found his treatment very effective (Vol I. p: 75). Another well-known doctor is *Babayan Pasha*, an Armenian obstetrician in the Ottoman who treated her intense stress and insomnia due to her hysterectomy operation (Vol II: p. 53).

While various physicians conducted her mother's general check-ups, one physician from America diagnosed her with *dengue fever*, which had arrived from India during this period (Vol I: p. 277). As an epidemic disease prevalent in tropical countries and the East, dengue fever first appeared in Istanbul in June 1889, and doctors at the time referred to it as 'our new guest' (Günergun, 2001: p. 180). Nigâr Hanım herself contracted dengue, which prevented her from writing for ten days due to weakness in her eyes. Her family later invited the Hungarian physician *Şuvariç* to provide further care (Vol II: p. 410). The Ottoman Empire valued the expertise of doctors from diverse origins, from the Sultan to his subjects, prioritizing their abilities regardless of nationality (Boyar, 2018: p. 226).

Several weeks later, her father was diagnosed with the epidemic influenza. Physicians visited him periodically, although it soon became evident that he needed to be hospitalized. At this point, she expressed over her nursing care and compared Western attitudes toward nursing with those in the East. In her view, nursing in the Ottoman Empire was a familial duty, particularly for women (Vol I: p. 429). Until the early 20th century, nursing was not considered a separate profession in the Ottoman Empire; instead, it was performed by wives, mothers, sisters, and female relatives (Sarı, 1996/7: p. 26). Considering it as a tradition, Nigâr Hanım assumed the duty of a nurse and placed herself in a situation where she had to constantly check on family members. Her diaries explicitly demonstrate that women played a vital role as caregivers within the family during this period.

4.3. The Interplay of Health, War, and Modernity in Nigâr Hanım's European Journeys and Final Years

Nigâr Hanım's journeys across Europe reflect not only her pursuit of cultural and intellectual enrichment but also her personal resilience in the face of health challenges. In 1910, she traveled to Budapest at the invitation of her niece living in Hungary, followed by a visit to Vienna. As Koç emphasizes, the primary motivation behind Nigâr Hanım's travels was her "health issues," although it is evident that these journeys also enhanced her zest for life (2020: p. 702). Since this article centers on healing practices, Nigâr Hanım's health-related experiences during these European journeys may offer valuable insights, as illustrated in her diaries.

When her gynecological condition worsened during her time in Vienna, Dr. Maskowitz at the Rudolfinum Hospital determined that surgery was necessary. She was subsequently transferred to the Wilzech Pavillon for the operation, where she first underwent a *hysterectomy*, followed by an *appendectomy* (Vol II: p. 43). Following her pains after the operations, the physician attempted another surgery on her belly without morphine. Witnessing everything with her own eyes, Nigâr Hanım's mental state was further distressed by the doctor's attitude, turning the experience into a traumatic memory. She wrote:

"I can still hear the sound of the scalpel, and my screams still echo in my ears. In an instant, I saw three crystal bowls filled with blood. I realized I had been struck by infection and assumed they chose this method because if they put me under with my weakened state, I might not wake up. As the assistants bandaged my newly opened wound, I will never forget how Maskowitz, having put down the scalpel as if nothing had happened, moved to the patient in the room and said, "Wie geht's?". Until that painful moment, I had never been subjected to such a savage act as withholding a word of consolation from me. Surely, if asked, he would calmly state that he had saved a life." (Vol. II: p. 44)

She referred to the six weeks that she spent in the hospital as a period of calamity. During the subsequent four-week recovery period at home, another physician, Wolfsgruber, visited her for a check-up. She recalled him with respect and devotion (Vol II: p. 46). On May 30, she left Vienna on the *Expresse d'Orient*, filled with hope of reuniting with her beloved East.

Two years later, she embarked on another European journey, visiting Budapest, Vienna, Innsbruck, Paris, Bucharest, and Zurich. With the outbreak of the Balkan Wars, she returned to her country and assisted war victims by engaging with charity organizations (Vol II: p. 58). During this period, a significant development was the establishment of solidarity associations by literate women from the upper class. These included charitable organizations such as nationalist women's associations formed to aid wounded soldiers. Notably, Nigâr Hanım became an active member and speaker in the Ottoman Hanımları Cemiyet-i Hayriyesi, which was created to support injured soldiers and was mentioned in her diaries. As Nicone van Os's research highlights, women's active participation in these associations not only provided critical support during wartime but also paved the way for prominent female figures in the public sphere (2000: p. 369).

With the war, the old glorious days faded into memory. As the winter of 1918 ended, a typhus epidemic swept through Istanbul, and Nigâr Hanım experienced her first severe attack of the disease, without knowing that it would mark her final days. She made her last diary entry eleven days before her death from the epidemic that ravaged the city. Her final words, written amidst her illness, reflected her personal struggles and the broader societal upheavals of her time.

5. Conclusion

In examining the interplay between personal narratives and medical contexts, Nigâr Hanım's diaries emerge as a valuable source for understanding the complexities of identity, tradition, and cultural change in the late Ottoman Empire. Her family history, particularly the presence of a supportive and influential father figure, appears to have shaped her multicultural identity, linking her personal experiences to broader imperial histories and the social upheavals of the period. Beyond individual remedies, her writings reveal the coexistence of traditional and modern medical practices, especially among elite families, who reflect microcosms of societal transformations. As a Muslim woman navigating these shifting realities, Nigâr Hanım maintained a delicate balance between tradition and modernity in her daily life, offering a holistic perspective on health that intertwines physical, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions.

Nigâr Hanım's diaries reveal a harmonious integration of traditional practices, modern medical advancements, and spiritual beliefs in her approach to health and healing. Rather than relying exclusively on one method, she pragmatically combined them, turning to traditional remedies or spiritual practices when modern medicine fell short, and vice versa. Her health-related reflections often shifted between practical action and deep personal introspection, where illness could be seen as both a physical ailment and a spiritual trial. This fluidity demonstrates her ability to adapt to the evolving medical landscape while staying rooted in her cultural and personal values, even as she occasionally critiqued the emotional detachment of modern medical practitioners.

To sum up, she not only provides insights into the history of medicine and healing practices of her time but also embodies the experience of a woman navigating these changes firsthand. Her engagement with evolving medical methods, her self-awareness as a patient, and her critical observations contribute to a nuanced understanding of healing practices in the late Ottoman period. Furthermore, her involvement in the emerging women's movement and the development of a collective female consciousness illustrates her broader role in shaping the social and cultural narratives of her era. Therefore, this work situates Nigâr Hanım at the intersection of personal health, medical history, and the burgeoning feminist discourse of the time. It proves that the diaries remain a testament to engagement with the world around a female subject, offering a perspective on the intersection of political and medical history, healing practices, and gender in the late Ottoman period.

References

- Afacan, Şeyma (2010). *From Traditionalism to Modernism: Mental Health in the Ottoman Empire* [Master's Thesis, Sabancı University]. Available from Council of Higher Education database (Thesis no: 309054).
- Aktaş, Ayfer (2007). Türkçede Almanca Kaynaklı Kelimeler [German Origin Words in Turkish Language]. *Türk Dil Kurumu* 6/2017, pp: 522–252.
- Aslan, Miray/Şah Sözen, Bilge/Şar, Sevgi (2013). Alternatif Bir Tedavi Sistemi: Homeopati. [An Alternative Treatment System: Homeopathy: Review.] *Türkiye Klinikleri J Pharm Sci.* 2(2): pp. 47–54.
- Bekiroğlu, Nazan (2011). *Şair Nigâr Hanım* [Poet Nigar Hanım]. İstanbul: Timaş Press.
- Boyar, Ebru (2018). Medicine in Practice: European Influences on the Ottoman Medical Habitat. *Turkish Historical Review* 9, pp: 213–241.
DOI:10.1163/18775462-00903001
- DİA/Encyclopedia of Islam (1994). Düşünme [Thinking], Vol 10, pp. 53–57. Online access: <https://islamansiklopedisi.org.tr/dusunme>
- Gauvin, J. F. (2012). The Instrument That Never Was: Inventing, Manufacturing, and Branding Réaumur's Thermometer During the Enlightenment. *Annals of Science*, 69(4), 515–549.
- Günergun, Feza (2001). Diseases in Turkey: A Preliminary Study for the Second Half of the 19th Century. In: *The Imagination of the Body and the History of Bodily Experience* (ed. S. Kuriyama). Kyoto (Japan): International Research Center for the Japanese Studies, pp. 169–191.
- İhsanoğlu, Ekmeleddin (2004). Ottoman Science: The Last Episode in Islamic Scientific Tradition and The Beginning of European Scientific Tradition. In *Science, Technology and Industry in the Ottoman World*, ed. Ekmeleddin İhsanoğlu, Ahmed Djebbar and Feza Günergun. Proceedings of the XXth International Congress of History of Science 1997, pp. 11–48.
- Karpat, Kemal (2002). Kossuth In Turkey: The Impact of Hungarian Refugees In The Ottoman Empire, 1849-1851. In Reinhard Schulze (Ed.): *Studies on Ottoman Social and Political History, Selected Articles and Essays*. Leiden; Boston; Köln: Brill.
- Kılıç, Rüya (2023). *Erken Modern Osmanlı'da Deliler ve Delilik* [Madness and Insanity in The Early Modern Ottoman Period]. İstanbul: İletişim Press.
- Koç, Hüsnüye (2020). Nigâr Hanım'ın Günlüklerinde Benlik İnşası: Geç Osmanlı Dönemi'nde Kadın Özneyi Yazmak [The Consturction of the Self in Nigâr Hanım's Diaries: Writing the Female Subject in the Late Ottoman Period. In: *Journal of Turkish Language and Literature* 60/2. pp. 669–718.
- Molnár, Miklós (2014): *A Concise History of Hungary*. United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Nazır, Bayram (2016): *Osmanlı'ya Sığınanlar, Macar ve Polonyalı Mülteciler* [Refugees in the Ottoman Empire, Hungarian and Polish Refugees]. İstanbul: Yeditepe Press.
- Nicone von Os (2000). Ottoman women's organizations: Sources of the past, sources for the future. *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations*, 11:3, pp. 369-383.
- Nicone von Os (2001). *Osmanlı Müslümanlarında Feminizm* [Feminism Among Ottoman Muslims]. In: *Cumhuriyet'e Devreden Düşünce Mirası: Tanzimat ve Meşrutiyet'in Birikimi* [The Legacy of Thought Transferred to the Republic: The Accumulation of the Tanzimat and the Constitutional Monarchy]. Ed. Tanıl Bora and Murat Gültekinil. İstanbul: İletişim Press, pp. 335–347.
- Nigâr binti Osmanî (2021). *Günlük I, 24 Ocak 1887-14 Nisan 1890* [The Diary I, January 24 1887-April 14 1890]. Ed. Zeynep Berktaş. İstanbul: Timaş Press.
- Nigâr binti Osmanî (2023). *Günlük II, 20 Ocak 1894-19 Mart 1918* [The Diary II, January 20 1894-March 19 1918]. Ed. Zeynep Berktaş. İstanbul: Timaş Press.
- Paperno, I. (2004). What Can Be Done with Diaries? In: *The Russian Review*, 63(4), pp. 561–573. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3663979>
- Rethelyi Mari (2014): Hungarian Nationalism and the Origins of Neolog Judaism. In: *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 11, pp. 67–82.

- Sarı, Nil (1996/7). Osmanlı Sağlık Hayatında Kadının Yeri [Women Dealing with Health During the Ottoman Reign] In: Yeni Tıp Tarihi Araştırmaları 2-3 [The New History of Medicine Studies 2-3], pp. 11–64.
- Shefer-Mossensohn, Miri (2009). *Ottoman Medicine: Healing and Medical Institutions, 1500-1700*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Shefer-Mossensohn, Miri (2016). Medicine in Ottoman Empire. In: *Encyclopaedia of the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Non-Western Cultures* (ed. Helaine Selin): USA: Springer Dordrecht, pp. 3048–3054.
- Taylor, AJP (1981). *The Habsburg Monarchy 1809-1918*. England: Penguin Books.
- Whalen, Francis X/ Bacon, Douglas R./ Smith, Hugh M (2005). Inhaled Anesthetics: An Historical Overview. In: *Best Practice & Research Clinical Anaesthesiology*, 19 (3), pp. 323–330.
- Zihnioğlu, Yaprak (2003). *Kadınsız İnkılâp* [Revolution without Women]. Istanbul: Metis Publications.