

## *Portrayals of Modern Girls' Desires in Uno Chiyo's and Suat Derviř's Literary Works*

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### **Abstract**

The figure of the modern girl emerged in Turkey and Japan in the 1920s. Modern girls' Westernised looks and progressive lifestyles made them a popular subject for authors and the media. However, the portrayals of modern girls by male authors and media outlets often relied on stereotypical depictions. This paper argues that the figure transcends the limited representations of the male gaze, emphasising the need for a comprehensive understanding through exploring desire and self-representation in women authors' literary works. Although modern girls played an important role in feminist history as a transnational phenomenon, there is a lack of comparative literary studies dedicated to this figure. While Japanese modern girls (*modan gaaru* or *moga*) have been compared to their counterparts in Korea, China, and the West, Turkish modern girls (*modern kız*) have received limited scholarly attention globally. Exploring the portrayal of Turkish and Japanese modern girls in literature provides valuable insights into the influence of Westernisation on non-Western societies and contributes to the understanding of intersections in women's lives. This research focuses on the representations of modern girls in Japanese author Uno Chiyo's (1897-1996) and Turkish novelist Suat Derviř's (1905-1972) selected literary works. It adopts feminist desire theories as a framework to demonstrate the complexity of the modern girl figure and expand the discussion beyond its mere resemblance to Western ideals.

Keywords: Modern Girls, Comparative Literature, Gender Representation, Women Authors

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## Introduction

Modern girls emerged in an era where consumerism and commodity culture were on the rise. Godeau (1996) explains commodity culture as the “eroticisation of the objects in which the feminine image operates as a mirror of desire” (p. 113). Modern girls, regarded as the epitome of this culture, were heavily commercialised and transformed into desirable objects for promoting products. They came from diverse backgrounds, including middle-class flappers and young, working-class women; the urban life brought them together. They challenged conventional beauty standards with their youthful, slender, almost “boyish” but also feminine qualities (Nicholas, 2015, p. 40). Their characteristics involved short hair, makeup, and Western clothes. In the 1920s, as women increasingly participated in public spaces, they became more exposed to the public eye. Prior to the emergence of capitalism, gender divisions and their associated spheres created a clear separation between men and women in terms of sexual desire. However, in the 1920s, these boundaries began to blur as women started liberating themselves from the imposed notions of “correct” sexuality and gender roles (Takemura, 2002, p. 55). Modern girls, the most visible among them, faced harsh criticism and were sometimes mocked by the media.

The Japanese modern girl was a controversial figure who challenged traditional gender roles and the Meiji ideology of the “good wife, wise mother”. This concept emerged in the late 19th century as part of the national agenda to build a modern state that emphasised domestic roles assigned to women. Japanese intellectuals’ views on modern girls varied greatly, with some expressing positive sentiments but the majority leaning towards negative perceptions. A study on 1920s women’s magazines reveals a woman intellectual’s remarks on the topic, describing New Women<sup>1</sup> as “kindred spirits” due to their novel ideas, but she believed that there was little depth to explore in the thinking of modern girls, whereas a prominent feminist figure Hiratsuka Raichō commented on Japanese modern girls as “the daughter of the New Woman” (Sato, 2003, pp. 55-57). According to Driscoll (2010), Marxist journalist Ōya Sōichi characterised *moga* and *mobo* (modern boy) as individuals driven by “superficial desires for cheap new sensations” (p. 145). The reactions to Japanese modern girls were mixed, but the discourse surrounding them mostly emphasised their association with the capitalist culture.

The Turkish modern girls elicited similar reactions within society. In Turkey, the Westernisation process started in the Tanzimat Era (1839-1876). As the Ottoman Empire had significantly weakened by the nineteenth century, it was believed that adopting Western European practices and culture was necessary to enhance the empire's security and keep up with the advancements of the Western world. The figure of the modern girl emerged around 1923 when the Turkish Republic was established. For reformists, she represented a figure with greater agency, symbolising a welcome change. However, Islamist groups held negative views towards modern girls. In popular novels, Turkish modern girls were often portrayed as either nationalists or Western degenerates. The term “Turkish modern girls” refers to young women who resided and worked in major cities, deviating from the idealised image of the Republican woman, as the latter was expected to fulfil her maternal duties akin to the Meiji Government's “good wife, wise mother” ideology.

As there are multiple perspectives on modern girls, defining and identifying them, particularly in literature, presents a challenge. However, certain common traits can be

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<sup>1</sup> New Women group emerged in the 1910s, primarily consisting of intellectual, middle-class women who played a significant role in Japanese feminist history. Unlike modern girls, the New Women were an organised group and established a magazine called *Seitō* (Bluestockings).

observed among modern girls, including their engagement in urban environments and active participation in public spaces. This study identifies and explores modern girls based on their lifestyles, shedding light on their significant role in feminist history. It deviates from scholars of the modern girl discourse who primarily emphasise the consumerist aspects of modern girls, suggesting that they adopted a more passive stance regarding feminist movements. By delving into the multifaceted aspects of modern girls' desires in women authors' works, this study aims to provide a more nuanced understanding of their experiences.

In this paper, interpretation of the texts is rooted in desire theories with a feminist approach. It is informed by the work of influential feminist theorists, such as Cixous (1991) and Irigaray (1985), who argue that writing can serve as a means for women to express their desires, which have traditionally been portrayed as passive. The framework also draws on Felski's (2003) ideas, who emphasises the significance of examining women's experiences and voices in literary texts, asserting that female subjectivity is constructed through self-discovery in novels.

Aligned with these approaches, this study aims to identify recurring patterns in the portrayal of modern girl characters within the works of Derviş and Uno. It explores the origins of the characters' desires, the relationship between characters, and their divergence from stereotypical depictions. By employing this theoretical framework as a foundation, the analysis delves into the multifaceted experiences of modern girls, delving into their relationships and exploring the complex nature of these figures.

Uno Chiyo's *Aru hitori no onna no hanashi* (The Story of a Single Woman, 1971) and Suat Derviş's *Kadın Aşksız Yaşamaz* (A Woman Does Not Live Without Love, 1935) serve as the primary texts for the discussion in this paper. These works are chosen due to their basis in the authors' personal experiences as modern girls. Additionally, reference is made to other texts by Uno and Derviş that exhibit similar patterns and themes. Among the other texts that are mentioned are Uno's *Iro zange* (serialised in *Chūō Kōron* from 1933 to 1935 and translated into English as *Confessions of Love*), "Shifun no kao" (Painted Face, 1921), and Derviş's *Kendine Tapan Kadın* (The Woman Who Worships Herself, 1947), *Fosforlu Cevriye* (Cevriye the Glamorous, 1948) and *Bu Roman Olan Şeylerin Romanıdır* (This is the Novel of Things That Happen, 1937).

### **Japanese and Turkish modern girls: The myth and the female experience**

The act of looking involves relationships of power, encompassing difficulty, unpleasantness, and even danger. Once the gaze fulfils its duty, the process of representation begins, where meaning is constructed through language and images. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that these representations might not fully capture reality, as "labels and images produce meaning yet cannot fully invoke the experience of the object" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2018, p. 9). Images are shaped by the dynamics of social power and ideology. The dynamics of power and representation find resonance in the case of Turkish and Japanese modern girls during the 1920s and 1930s. The voyeuristic male gaze constructed an objectified image influenced by commodity fetishism and the dominant consumer culture.

Initially viewed as fashion icons, Japanese modern girls became associated with loose morals during the *ero guro nansensu*<sup>2</sup> movement of the 1930s. This perception was partly shaped by their presence in cafés, where modern life unfolded in streets and social spaces. Cafés, bars, restaurants, dance halls, and cinemas were extensions of the modern city, symbolising liberation for women and changing dynamics between men and women (Tipton, 2000, p. 119). Within this context, modern girls working as *jokyū* (café waitresses) and coming from various socio-economic backgrounds represented alternative possibilities for women. However, they lived in difficult conditions, and low wages made them dependent on tips to make ends meet. As a result, some of them succumbed to erotic services, and waitresses became objectified figures. Male authors such as Hirotsu Kazuo, Takeda Rintarō and Nagai Kafū depicted the waitress figure in their works, often expressing pessimism and discontent. In contrast, Japanese women authors like Uno Chiyo, Hayashi Fumiko, and Sata Ineko offered their perspectives and experiences as waitresses, allowing readers to access the uninterrupted female experience and the realities of being objectified by the male gaze.

In Turkey, music halls, restaurants, and casinos established by White Russians in Istanbul served a similar purpose to Japan's cafés, which were frequented by intellectuals, modern girls and modern boys. However, unlike the Japanese case, there is limited information about Turkish waitresses. Turkish authors, primarily focusing on urban life, either explored nationalist ideas or turned to people living in rural areas to address issues like inequality in their texts. It is important to note that there were fewer working-class women authors in Turkish literature of that period compared to Japan. This was mainly caused by the difference between modernisation in Japan and Turkey during the 1920s. Japan's modernisation in the 1920s was less state-led compared to the Meiji Era (1868-1912) (Tipton & Clark, 2000, p. 7), whereas Turkey's modernisation resembled the Meiji Era with significant state influence. Japan's education system was more improved and modernised, resulting in higher literacy rates and greater access to education for women. In contrast, Turkey faced challenges in raising literacy rates due to the transition from the Arabic to the Latin alphabet in 1928. Most Turkish women authors were from middle or upper-class backgrounds, who seem to bear more resemblance to the figure of the New Woman. However, working-class women became the subjects of Derviş's novels; she differed from her contemporaries by portraying women in urban settings and giving voice to their experiences. Both Uno's and Derviş's literary works offer valuable insights into the female experience, providing perspectives that differ from the dominant male-centered narratives, which deems them important in understanding the figure of the modern girl better.

### **The authors**

Uno Chiyo, born in 1897 in Iwakuni, experienced a significant loss at a young age with her mother's death. However, her stepmother became a cherished figure in her life, contrasting with her father's mostly negative and dominant presence (Copeland, 1992). Uno demonstrated a keen interest in makeup and fashion, regularly applying powder to her face and attracting attention in her hometown with her flashy, purple *hakama* (Copeland, 1992, p. 12). Despite her aspirations to study in Tokyo or Kyoto, Uno's economic circumstances compelled her to remain in Iwakuni and work as an elementary school teacher. Eventually, she was able to relocate to Tokyo after marrying her cousin. Uno took on various part-time

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<sup>2</sup> (Eng.) Erotic grotesque nonsense. An artistic and literary movement that emerged in the 1930s and promoted eroticism, cross-dressing, sexual freedom, queer sexuality and 'strange' fantasies, usually including gore (Freedman, 2011, p. 46). Cafés were associated with *ero guro* culture and thus marked as 'dangerous' places (Silverberg, 2006).

jobs, including hotel maid, waitress, model, tutor, and bookkeeper. These experiences in Tokyo served as a rich source of inspiration for her novels and short stories. While Uno gained popularity as an author, the majority of her works remain untranslated into English.

Uno's novels are commonly regarded as "the smaller world of personal heartbreak" (Birnbaum, 1999, p. 167). However, *The Story of a Single Woman* also offers an insightful portrayal of Japanese society in the late 1920s. The modern girl assumes multiple roles in the novel, embarking on a quest for a new identity and exploring alternative lifestyles. The narrative follows Kazue's journey from birth to her encounter with the painter Tanabe. While *The Story of a Single Woman* draws from Uno's life story, its narrative voice adopts a spectator's perspective, distinguishing it from her other autobiographical works.

In contrast to Uno Chiyo, Suat Derviş hailed from a privileged background as a member of an upper-class family of intellectuals. Having been homeschooled, she pursued higher education in Berlin before returning to Istanbul following her father's passing in 1932. Derviş embarked on a career as a reporter and translator, both in Turkey and Europe, and some of her stories were translated into German and featured in literary magazines.

While Derviş's earlier works predominantly revolve around the romantic affairs of middle or upper-class women, often incorporating gothic elements, her later novels shed light on the lives of working-class women, including factory workers and sex workers. This shift in focus can be attributed to Derviş's career as a reporter and her involvement with a leftist political party. During the 1930s, she interviewed workers and women engaged in marginalised professions. Derviş noted that her experience as a reporter and her interactions with various individuals influenced her transition toward writing more realistic novels, which she grew to cherish more than her earlier works (Oğurel, 2020). Derviş's novella, *A Woman Does Not Live Without Love*, is set in 1930s Istanbul and draws inspiration from her personal experiences. The novella revolves around the protagonist Cavide, a single woman working as a translator and living with her feline companion Şirin.

### **Analysis and findings**

Uno Chiyo's *The Story of a Single Woman* and Derviş's *A Woman Does Not Live Without Love* share common themes and patterns, such as loneliness, the desire for freedom, and the challenges women characters face in the workplace. Uno and Derviş depict their characters navigating a world where their desires and aspirations clash with societal norms, resulting in isolation and longing for connection. This analysis highlights the transformative potential of desire as a source that enables the characters to assert their agency in pursuing their aspirations.

### **Objectification, women as active desirers and desire to be free**

Uno's experiences with relationships served as both a wellspring of inspiration and an internal struggle as she grappled with the conflicting roles of being an obedient daughter or wife and a free-spirited woman aspiring to be a writer. A notable passage that captures Kazue's perspective on relationships further elucidates the complexities she grapples with:

She just could not understand why, when there was a relationship between a man and a woman, someone had to be hurt. Throughout her life she had been the victim any

number of times. But she never once held a grudge against the one who hurt her. (Uno, 1992, p. 125)

This passage reflects Kazue's enduring confusion and internal struggle as she navigates the ambiguous terrain of relationships and contemplates the enduring pain they often entail. In another example, Kazue becomes the target of a suitor's assault; she initially resists his advances, yet a part of her questions whether this is what she truly wants. Kazue's innate desire to please others leads her down a path of self-objectification, as she unwittingly accepts and internalises the roles imposed upon her, often blurring the boundaries between her desires and the expectations of others.

However, Kazue resists objectification by actively pursuing her desires in the novel. She challenges societal norms by questioning the institution of marriage, expressing herself through her clothing choices, and striving to earn her own money. Even in the face of harsh criticism, such as male characters labelling her heavy makeup as deceptive, Kazue remains steadfast in following her path. In another story titled "Painted Face," Uno tells the story of waitress Osumi whose lover loses interest in her when he sees her without her working clothes and makeup. The woman in her makeup and waitress uniform suggests the stereotypical modern girl or the object of desire. However, her true identity, stripped from all the modern girl commodities, poses a threat to patriarchy. For Kazue, makeup serves as a transformative disguise, simultaneously fascinating and terrifying. It becomes a mask that grants her the freedom to become someone else, enabling her to navigate the complexities of her existence.

Her restlessness further exemplifies Kazue's modern and liberal lifestyle. After being fired from her job due to her involvement with a fellow teacher, she leaves for Korea. Upon returning, she starts living with her cousin Jōji in Kyoto before eventually moving to Tokyo. Despite expressing her reluctance to marry, valuing her freedom, Kazue eventually does marry the writer Nozaki. However, their marriage is far from traditional, as Kazue sees it as a means to "wander" and explore rather than conform to societal expectations.

Uno's *Confessions of Love* is another fruitful work for exploring the experiences of the modern girl. The novella tells the story of Tōgō Seiji's affairs before he met Uno. Through portraying the male protagonist, Uno critiques the male perspective on the modern girl. Yuasa Jōji is depicted as passive, weak, and selfish, while the novel presents several powerful and modern women. These female characters challenge the stereotypical portrayals of modern girls in literature and subvert traditional gender roles. Instead of conforming to assigned roles, they undergo personal development and do not rely on Jōji to determine their futures. While these characters move on and adapt to modern Japan, Jōji experiences a sense of loss.

Similarly, in Derviş's *A Woman Does Not Live Without Love*, the depiction of modern girls exhibits similar qualities to Uno's modern girls. In the novella, Cavide is portrayed as strong and independent. Male characters repeatedly comment on Cavide's life as a single woman. Her boss assumes marriage is the key to her happiness, but she asserts that she has never considered marrying, even though she eventually does. Cavide is both the subject and object of the male gaze. Interactions between characters occur in entertainment venues such as cafés, bars, and music halls. At the beginning of the novel, Cavide goes to a café with her coworker Fahri, who persistently tries to hit on her and monitors her every action. Meanwhile, Cavide's gaze is directed at other men, such as a blonde foreigner at the café, whom she thinks is beautiful. Another instance involves her going to a Western-style bar with

her married boss. She is aware that he views her merely as a beautiful object, while Cavide sees him as a handsome man who can provide the life she desires. Cavide is torn between her desire for wealth and her love for her childhood friend, who cannot offer her the same lifestyle as her boss.

The recurrent pattern of being forced to choose between love and financial security can be observed in Derviş's other novels that depict modern girl characters. In *The Woman Who Worships Herself*, the initial portrayal of the protagonist suggests a materialistic woman who chooses marriage based on financial considerations, only to suffer the consequences of not prioritising love. In contrast to Cavide, Sara comes from a low-income family, and yearns for the wealth she never had, believing that greater financial resources would grant her freedom. While this novel can be interpreted as Derviş's critique of the capitalist system, it also unveils the internal conflicts and desires experienced by the commodified modern girl. The protagonist engages in a perpetual cycle of consumerism, constantly acquiring new possessions to fill an emotional void yet paradoxically experiencing increasing emptiness with each acquisition.

### **Longing for a better life**

Although Kazue enjoys wandering from place to place, her economic situation before meeting Nozaki forces her to work at several jobs. She takes jobs as a hotel or café waitress in Tokyo. Kazue barely has time to take care of herself; she calls herself "a doll dressed in rags" and "the object of pity" (Uno, 1992, p. 85). She does not live the glamorous life of a moga; she is a hard-working woman trying to survive in Tokyo while dreaming of becoming an established writer. However, Uno's portrayal of Kazue as a café waitress deviates from the predominantly negative depictions by male authors, who often presented café waitresses as self-sacrificing figures destined to be abandoned by their lovers. Kazue's chosen path enables her to succeed in various aspects of her life, despite her traumatic experiences.

The protagonist Cavide, living in Istanbul and trying to survive on her own, shares similar sentiments with Kazue. The story reveals that she has previously enjoyed a life of relative affluence, but after her father's death, she and her family struggle to make ends meet. Throughout the novella, Cavide yearns for the past, exemplified by her desire to get her hands on a bottle of perfume that is beyond her financial means, reflecting both her longing and consumerist tendencies. However, Cavide is also depicted as a hard worker who becomes weary of spending long hours writing, especially when translating texts that hold no interest to her. Additionally, she faces challenges when her coworker Fahri spreads rumours about her relationship with the director out of jealousy. Despite her confrontational nature, Cavide encounters hardships and begins to feel self-conscious at work, ultimately leading to her dismissal. "It is indeed difficult for a man to make a living, but women experience horrible things. Do men ever have to deal with things like this?" she asks (Derviş, 2019, p. 344). Derviş thus exposes the difficulties faced by working women and their desire for consumption as a means of envisioning a better life. In *This is the Novel of Things That Happen*, Nazlı, another modern girl character, harbours dreams of a brighter future while toiling in a challenging factory environment. One day, she defies her father's demands for money, instead choosing to spend it as she pleases, indulging in alcohol and seeking solace by the sea. As a consequence, her father subjects her to physical abuse, prompting her to flee from home.

These narratives illuminate the shared experiences of Kazue, Cavide, and Nazlı as they navigate the complexities of their lives, grapple with economic hardships, and yearn for personal fulfilment. Their stories reveal the enduring resilience and aspirations of the modern girl in the face of societal challenges and personal struggles.

### **Loneliness and desire to be loved**

Loneliness is a prominent theme in both Uno's and Derviş's works. In *The Story of a Single Woman*, Kazue experiences a profound sense of isolation stemming from a lack of understanding from her romantic partners. As her marriage with Nozaki begins to crumble, she increasingly feels discarded and neglected. After Kazue cuts her hair short, she questions whether she sought to emulate the youthful appearance of a girl she once observed sitting beside her husband. While short hair symbolises liberation for modern girls, Uno imbues it with a more personal significance. In Derviş's novella, Cavide enjoys the freedom of living alone. On the other hand, she constantly feels afraid of being alone in a big city. Derviş portrays an urban woman's loneliness who has lost her father like the author and struggles to survive in a city that is described as "full of possibilities" with an "uncanny" atmosphere.

Unlike Cavide who only receives emotional support from her mother, Derviş's most popular novel about a sex worker, *Cevriye the Glamorous* involves examples of solidarity between women. While Cavide chooses to marry her childhood friend to end her loneliness, Cevriye and her friends find solace in one another. The novel sheds light on the challenges and struggles faced by women with marginalised jobs in Istanbul. Through her encounters with clients, police officers, and other characters, Cevriye confronts the social and economic realities of her world while pursuing her desires. Even in death, Cevriye remains a symbol of resistance and dignity for those who knew her, and her legacy lives on in the memories of the other women who worked alongside her.

### **Conclusion**

The findings of this study highlight the significance of portraying modern girls as active desirers in literary works, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of their identity and inner worlds. Through the exploration of modern girls' experiences, readers are exposed to the inherent challenges that accompany a liberal lifestyle. Moreover, the interactions among the characters illustrate the diverse range of reactions modern girls faced.

In her literary works, Uno redefines concepts associated with the modern girl, such as short hair and makeup, imbuing them with a deeper emotional meaning. In contrast to the objectifying lens of the male gaze, Uno's narrative sheds light on the struggles and complexities that arise from the objectification of the modern girl figure. On the other hand, Derviş's narratives navigate the urban landscape, capturing the dreams and desires of modern girls. Their works depict the struggles and sacrifices these characters encounter in their relentless pursuit of happiness, challenging societal norms and presenting a more authentic portrayal of modern girls.

The common themes of longing for love and freedom reverberate throughout the literary works of both authors, actively challenging and expanding upon the stereotypical portrayals often associated with modern girlhood. Despite the cultural differences between the Japanese and Turkish modern girl characters depicted in Uno's and Derviş's narratives, their stories illuminate the complexities of women's desires. This analysis emphasises the necessity of



conducting a comprehensive exploration of modern girls in women authors' literary works, thereby unravelling the multifaceted nature of their identity.

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