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## Identity Construction and Historical Narratives: (Mis)Representation of Iran in the *Awakening the Great Seljuks*

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### Abstract

While existing research highlights the role of drama in shaping Turkish national identity, the veracity of the narratives conveyed through plays has not been investigated. The present study fills this gap through examination of the portrayal of Iran in the play *Awakening: The Great Seljuks*. This focus is critical, given that Iran constitutes a contrasting other for Turkey, against which Turkish national identity and political narratives are reinforced. Using a narrative analysis, the study identifies and examines discrepancies in the portrayal of time and location, characters, and concepts. The research aims to analyze whether the drama series' depiction of Iran aligns with historical accounts or reinterprets them through a contemporary lens to serve political-ideological purposes and to fit the series' narrative agenda. The findings reveal a disregard for Iranian history and figures, often recast or appropriated to serve Turkish narratives, with Iranian characters reinterpreted and/or historical ideas reframed through a contemporary lens. This representation of Iran and Iranian elements is further underscored by the selective deployment of mythological motifs.

**Keywords:** Drama Series, History, Identity, Iran, Narrative, Turkey

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, Turkey has embarked on a process of national identity reconstruction through embracing the country's historical legacies and reuniting with its historical past. In essence, under AKP (Justice and Development Party) rule, Turkey is trying to reidentify itself to the world by balancing its unique position between the East and the West. TV series are essential instruments of this identity reconstruction (Minavand, 1397 [2019 A.D.]; Avcı, 2019; Çevik, 2020; Doğramacı, 2014). The considerable investments made in producing historical dramas are decent indicators of the significance of drama series in Turkish policies to redefine and promote the country's national identity. The crucial matter this paper aims to address is whether bolstering national identity through drama series is performed in genuine or reinterpreted ways. This is largely neglected in the existing literature on Turkish identity construction. Although the present academic discourse highlights a growing interest in how media narratives shape perceptions of history, identity, and foreign policy, it fails to demonstrate the accuracy of storytelling practiced in Turkish drama series produced for the purpose of advancing the government's favored narrative.

Researchers like Bilis (2013) and Avcı (2019) emphasize the dual role of these series in both entertaining the audience and serving the political agendas. They argue that narratives of the past, particularly concerning the Ottoman era, are manipulated by the ruling parties to forge a collective national identity. Doğramacı (2014) and Minavand (1307 [2019 A.D.]) discuss the complexities of identity in these dramas, emphasizing the interplay among religion, ethnicity, and power in Turkish identity construction. Their analyses demonstrate how modern storytelling techniques

create relatable historical narratives, regardless of historical accuracy. Meanwhile, Kosari and Amouri (1392 [2014 A.D.]) adopt a postcolonial perspective, arguing that the reevaluation of identity necessitates a critical understanding of the historical narratives presented to the audience. Çevik (2020) highlights the political implications of storytelling, emphasizing television's relevance in shaping public opinion within the context of neo-Ottoman aspirations.

Despite illuminating the relationship between Turkish historical plays and identity construction, the existing studies fail to explore the veracity of the narratives offered in Turkish series through their examination against consensual or widely acknowledged historical facts. The present paper fills this gap with a focus on Iran, studying whether Iran is portrayed in a balanced and real way that confirms the known history. Iran is chosen as a case of focus because the country is a significant subject for Turkey, as Iran is among the countries against which Turkish values, specific ways of life, and distinct historical experiences stand out. Iranian dynasties have delineated the eastern limits for the Ottoman Empire's eastward expansion, with respect to the great wars between the two sides throughout history. This reality makes Iran a significant *other* for Turkey and a decent reference according to which Turkey can make up its distinct historical character. It is also noteworthy that the representation of Iran's historical figures in Turkish historical plays is a matter of essential considerations for Turkish cultural identity and their historical perception of Iranians. Analyzing these portrayals makes it possible to understand how narratives about Iran are constructed and disseminated to both Turkish and international audience. This exploration reveals Turkey's broader approach to Iranian heritage, highlighting whether Iran is treated

with respect in Turkish narration of its history or, conversely, the neighboring country is subject to reinterpretation and appropriation.

To reach the stated objective, this research conducts a comprehensive narrative analysis of the historical series *Awakening The Great Seljuks*<sup>1</sup>, aired in 2020 on TRT1. This analysis identifies the narrator of the story, evaluates how correctly the time and place of the depicted events correspond with historical facts, and explores how contemporary concepts are incorporated into the narrative. This is a notable contribution to the academic discourse on Turkish identity construction through studying the veracity of the series' narration, which presents Turkey's past. It contributes to understanding the degree to which Turkey is mindful of presenting historical facts accurately, avoiding diverted instrumentalization of history for political purposes. The methodology employed in this research is narrative analysis, which examines stories, events, and discourse to uncover their underlying structures, meanings, and cultural impact. This method posits that narratives construct and convey ideological aspects that may shape societal norms and values (Mayer, 2014). Through the examination of various narrative forms, the analysis may reveal how the framing of characters, plots, and themes directly contributes to the formation of identities and influences perceptions of self and others. This is pertinent because the series under study possesses characteristics of both a historical text and a media narrative.

To fulfill the objectives outlined above, thirty-four scripts of all episodes of the show are analyzed with a focus on the discursive, conceptual, character-driven, messaging, event-related, and symbolic features present in the text. After providing a concise

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1. Uyanış: Büyük Selçuklu

summary of the series' plot, the scripts are compared with classic historical texts and existing sources from the Seljuk period. To facilitate the comparisons, several historical works are referred to, including *Siyāsatnāma* by Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk, *Kimya-ye Sa'adat*, and *Nasihāt al-Muluk* by Imam Muhammad Ghazali. All of these texts date back to the Seljuk era, and their authors are depicted as prominent figures in the series. By examining the verbal and discursive elements in these historical writings, comparisons are drawn to the characters' actions, narratives, and scenarios portrayed in the show. Subsequently, additional sources are explored: the sources that delve into Turkic legends, influential Iranian historical figures, and notable events from the relevant period to enhance the understanding of the context. The objectives of the paper are to identify the narrator of the story, to evaluate how accurately the time and place of the depicted events correspond with historical facts, and to analyze the soundness of the contemporary concepts incorporated into the narrative.

Accordingly, the article is structured into four parts. The first part establishes the conceptual framework, discussing the influence of historiography and narratives on identity formation. The second part offers a plot summary of the drama series under study. In the third part, the narrative analysis of the show is conducted, highlighting its main themes, characters, and historical context. The section also explores how Iran is portrayed throughout the series, demonstrating the level of alignment between the narration conveyed by the series and historically known facts. The conclusion presents an additional discussion about the results and provides a synthesis of the paper's findings.

## 2. Identity Construction: Narratives, Power, and History

Identity, whether individual or collective, is shaped through complex interactions of social, historical, and cultural contexts. Theories of identity construction suggest that identities are dynamic and fluid, reflecting both personal and shared experiences. Scholars like Anthony Giddens emphasize the role of ongoing social practices in forming identities (Giddens, 1991), while Richard Jenkins highlights how power dynamics and historical memory influence this process. Identity comprises varying layers, formed through situational, social, and cultural interactions, making it an evolving construct that responds to changing environments. Collective identity often relies on deliberate narratives that shape a sense of belonging and unity. A nation can be defined through shared elements of language, culture, and history. These shared aspects are constructed through collective narratives crafted by political elites to foster social cohesion and provide common values.

Halbwachs underscores the centrality of collective memory in this process, arguing that a society's historical narrative is key to its self-perception and identity alignment (Halbwachs, 1992). As Friedman notes, history plays a crucial role in documenting and sharing human experiences, directly influencing the shaping of national and cultural identities (Friedman, 1992). Governments, media, and educational systems significantly influence the stabilization of identities. These entities employ tools such as laws, curricula, propaganda, and mass media to promote specific values, beliefs, and ideals. The goal is often to create a unified national or cultural identity that enhances loyalty and cohesion. This deliberate shaping of identity also works to reinforce state authority and governance systems. Francis Fukuyama also notes that identity is

not static but continually redefined in response to external changes (Fukuyama, 2018). While liberalists argue that economic solutions can address identity issues, critics point out that the dynamic nature of identity ensures it evolves alongside societal shifts. Recognition and validation of identity are crucial to individual self-esteem, making identity politics a dominant theme in modern political discourse. Fukuyama further observes that societal confusion arises when traditional moral frameworks collapse, driving people to seek shared identities through populist narratives. This dynamic underlines the connection between identity and political power.

Narratives construct boundaries between *them* and *us*, shaping how communities define themselves and their adversaries. These boundaries are often portrayed through stories that delineate community membership while identifying perceived enemies. Powerful groups influence these narratives by defining collective identities through shared symbols and meanings. The process of constructing collective identities is significantly influenced by history. As Halbwachs notes, collective memory is constructed through agreed-upon narratives that align with a society's historical identity (Halbwachs, 1992). Friedman emphasizes that the deliberate use of history in identity construction documents human experiences and provides the foundation for national and cultural identities (Friedman, 1992). Furthermore, Carr and Iggers argue that historiography often serves political agendas, reinforcing dominant ideologies while sidelining alternative perspectives (Iggers, 2005; Carr, 2002). Such manipulations reinterpret historical facts and create collective memories that strengthen existing power structures.

Narratives are tools for recording history and persuasion in politics and society. Mayer (2014) emphasizes that narratives shape

thought processes, emotions, and personal identities. They convey values, nurture social bonds, and help individuals cope with challenges. Stories are memorable and persuasive, offering causal explanations that frame actions and events in rational ways. Meyer highlights that narratives are effective because they evoke both emotional and intellectual resonance with audiences (Mayer, 2014). Cinema and television are highly influential in this process of recalling history through narratives. They significantly influence public perceptions of history and identity. Scholars like Ferro and Rosenstone describe these mediums as powerful tools of historiography that reshape historical narratives to suit contemporary needs (Ferro, 1995; Rosenstone, 2002). These representations often intertwine myth and reality, making them effective in fostering collective memory. Television, in particular, bridges the past and present through engaging storytelling, offering audiences vivid and emotionally resonant portrayals of history. Such portrayals can overshadow traditional historical texts, reinforcing societal identities through visual memory.

### 3. Summary of the Plot

The narrative of *Awakening: The Great Seljuks* unfolds in the Seljuk Empire, starting with Alp Arslan's victorious conquest of the Berzem Fortress and his subsequent assassination by Yusuf Khwarazmi. Sultan Malik-Shah, while grieving his wife's death during childbirth, is persuaded by Nizam al-Mulk and Omar Khayyam to hide his newborn son, Ahmed (later known as Sanjar), to protect *the state*. Ahmed is secretly raised by Nizam al-Mulk and trained as a warrior. Eighteen years later, Sanjar becomes a skilled fighter and infiltrates the Ismailis, who are portrayed as a group plotting against the Seljuks and Abbasid Caliphate in favor of the

Fatimids. He uncovers their plans to assassinate Malik-Shah and informs Nizam al-Mulk. He heroically saves the Sultan during the assassination attempt but cannot reveal his true identity as Malik-Shah's son. The Sultan, unaware of the connection, rewards Sanjar with a prized horse, forging a bond between them. As Sanjar engages more deeply with the Ismailis, he uncovers their broader vision for an alternative political order (governance style), which challenges the Seljuk authority.

As the story progresses, the complexities of gender dynamics and the roles of women within the Seljuk Empire come to light. The imperial court is not merely a backdrop for political maneuvering but also a stage where powerful women like Terken and Safiye compete for influence. Terken, Malik-Shah's ambitious wife, seeks to use her position to assert control over political decisions and manipulate the inner workings of the empire. Conversely, Safiye, the Sultan's mother, represents a more traditional view, advocating for stability and continuity within the royal lineage. Their competition reveals the entrenched power structures and gender dynamics of the period, where women exert considerable, though frequently indirect, influence through their connections with male sovereigns.

The impact of notable historical individuals such as Nizam al-Mulk, Omar Khayyam, and Imam Muhammad Ghazali enhances the storyline, highlighting the intellectual and philosophical context of the time. Meanwhile, the nefarious schemes of Hassan Sabbah and the Ismailis unfold in parallel, showcasing a faction that becomes increasingly radicalized against the Seljuk rule. Sabbah's leadership of Ismailis signifies a significant ideological challenge, as he promotes heterodox interpretations of Islam that resonate with a disenfranchised populace. The Ismailis view Malik-Shah's rule

as tyrannical, believing that their actions could usher in a new era under Fatimid leadership. Sanjar's infiltration of this sect introduces a critical adversary that he must confront, and this mission tests both his skills as a warrior and his commitment to his lineage.

In the following episodes, betrayals from within, sabotage by foreign agents, and the continuous victories of the Turks through intelligence, wisdom, kindness, as well as their faith in God, are depicted. Melik-Shah's uncles and brothers rebel against him to seize the throne. Sabbah and his followers seek to establish the Batini state and, to achieve this goal, place many agents within the government apparatus. Terken Khatun seeks power and conspires with Taj al-Mulk although she still does not have a son. The Crusaders, led by a woman named Livia, have entered Isfahan and have allied with the Batinis to eliminate their common enemy, the Seljuks. Numerous Sufi and spiritual scenes, featuring Iranian Sufi characters such as Ghazali, Khwaja Yusuf Hamadani, and Khayr al-Nassaj, are included. The glory and power of Zubeydeh Khatun, who single-handedly fights the enemy, commands, executes justice, provides military supplies, and is tasked with ensuring the security of a caravan. The mythical symbols, from animals and figures to concepts, appear throughout the narrative. The narrative also portrays the Turks' kindness towards a foreigner named Albert, who is held captive among them. Over time, Albert is deeply influenced by their beliefs, ultimately converting to Islam. In addition to his spiritual transformation, he actively assists the Turks in their efforts to achieve their goals and, moved by their cause, seeks martyrdom in the process.

The series delves into essential themes like loyalty, justice, and the pursuit of power, culminating in a clash between the Seljuks

and the Shia Ismailis. The interaction of intellectual discourse, gender roles, and political intrigue all contributes to deepening the narrative, creating a complex examination of a critical point in history. The plot weaves a rich fabric of human ambition, ideological disputes, and the persistent battle for supremacy. The intertwined destinies of characters illustrate the complexity of a historical era marked by both grandeur and treachery. Through its compelling characters and plot lines, the series invites audiences to reflect on the nature of power and the sacrifices made in its name, ensuring that the Turkic-Islamic legacy of this period resonates deeply with viewers.

#### **4. Narrative Analysis**

In this section, the narrative of the series is analyzed into three parts: time and place, characters, and concepts. In the first part, events are examined from a spatial perspective, focusing on place-names and geographical dimensions. Furthermore, dates recorded in ancient texts and related research on scientific historiography are evaluated to assess the accuracy of the series' narrative from a chronological standpoint. In the second section, reference is made to the surviving ancient texts about historical figures from this period, such as Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk and Abu Hamid Muhammad Ghazali, as well as scholarly works related to this historical era that discuss personalities like Ghazali, Khawaja Nizam, Khayyam, Hassan Sabbah, and Khawaja Yusuf Hamadani. In the third part, an examination is offered of the terms and phrases that have not been used in their historical context and have instead been applied in contemporary common usage. Additionally, the role of Turkic mythological stories and legendary figures in advancing the narrative is addressed.

#### 4. 1. Time and Place

A notable aspect of the series' narrative is the inconsistency between the historical record and the depicted events. One prominent area of concern is the portrayal of geographical contexts and the associated significance of certain locations. In the series, the city of Shalmzar<sup>1</sup> frequently emerges as a critical site for the Batenians and their conflicts with the Seljuks. However, historical documents fail to corroborate its significance, raising questions about the accuracy of the narrative. *The Fortresses of Assassins* by Peter Wille, *Ismaili Fortresses in the Alborz Mountains* by Manouchehr Sotoudeh, *Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* by Ibn Athir, *The Story of Islam and the Ismaili Sect* by Marshall Hodgson, *The History of Hashashins* by Joseph von Hammer, *Jāmi' al-Tawārīkh* by Rashid al-Din Hamadani and various articles about the Nizari Ismailis and Hashashins, mention no record of this city as the first city captured by Nizaris. The absence of Shalmzar in primary historical sources suggests an intentional reshaping of history, indicating a form of historical construction that could mislead viewers regarding the geographical landscape of the Seljuk period.

The series also compresses events, creating an accelerated timeline that amalgamates numerous occurrences into a condensed narrative. Essential historical events unfold unrealistically within a restricted timeframe. This chronological misrepresentation complicates the narrative and the audience's understanding of the broader historical context. For instance, historical sources indicate that Sanjar was eleven years old when he became the governor of Khorasan (Rezaeian, 1391 [2012 A.D.]), which occurred after the

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1. In today's borders of Iran, the city of Shalmzar is located in the Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari Province, serving as the center of Kiar County, and is situated thirty kilometers south of Shahrekord.

death of Malik-Shah. In contrast, the series depicts Sanjar as being over twenty years old and attaining this position while Malik-Shah is still alive. Another example is the case of Khayyam and Hassan Sabah, both of whom were both at least thirty years younger than Khwaja Nizam; however, in the series, all three appear to be of the same age. Additional instances include the murder of Nizar and the split between the Musta'li and the Nizari, the marriage of Mah-Malak, the daughter of Turkan Khatun and Malik-Shah, with the caliph of Baghdad, the death of Ibn Attash, Malik-Shah's order to establish a new calendar, the duration of Malik-Shah's reign, the crusaders' entry into Asia Minor and more. Such discrepancies further complicate relationships and narratives in ways that do not accurately reflect the historical context. By reshaping the importance of locations and compressing timelines, the series offers a misleading representation of the Seljuk era.

## 4. 2. Characters

### 4. 2. 1. Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk

Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk Tusi, born in 1018 AD in Tus, was a renowned Iranian Vizier<sup>1</sup> influential in the expansion of the Seljuk Empire. He served as the Vizier to Alp Arslan, Malik-Shah, and their predecessor Chaghri Beg. His contributions to Iranian governance, military expansion, and education were profound, particularly through his founding of the Nizamiyyah schools in multiple cities. These schools aimed to advance knowledge, particularly in Sunni Islam, though their strict policies restricted access to only Shafi'i and Hanafi Muslims. He was an influential

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1. minister

figure whose role in consolidating power under the Seljuk dynasty helped stabilize the empire, spreading its fame across the East and West. His immense wealth and power were legendary. His most lasting intellectual legacy, *Siyāsatnāma*, which he wrote in response to Malik-Shah's request, is a comprehensive guide to governance and state management, reflecting Iranian royal traditions while dealing with the complexities of Turkish tribalism.

Khwaja's *Siyāsatnāma* was crafted to address the challenges that arose from the domination of Turkish tribal traditions, which contrasted with Iran's well-established royal traditions. Khwaja sought to link the Seljuk rulers to the legendary kings of Iran, thus providing legitimacy to their rule. In this book, he also traced the Seljuk lineage back to Afrasiyab (Nizam al-Mulk, 1999, p. 13), the legendary figure in Iranian mythology, to further cement their connection to Iran's royal past. The Iranian royal model of governance, as emphasized in *Siyāsatnāma*, was distinct from the Turkic tribal system. Khwaja's ideal form of governance, as reflected in both his writings and Al-Ghazali's work, was rooted in Iranian principles, rather than the Turkish style of rule. Many scholars have described Khwaja as a proponent of the *Iranshahri* thought, which is evident in his writings (Darvishalipour Astane & Bagheri Khalili, 1395 [2016 A.D.]; Khalatbari & Dalir, 1388 [2010 A.D.]).

In the Seljuk court, the position of the Vizier was of immense importance, and Nizam al-Mulk was one of the most powerful figures in the empire. His position and influence were unparalleled, as he played a central role in the administration, military affairs, and the governance of the empire. The *Siyāsatnām* stresses that the Vizier's competence was crucial to the stability of the kingdom. According to the book, a Vizier who appoints unqualified people to

positions of power and neglects the learned and virtuous would signify the kingdom's descent into ruin (Nizam al-Mulk, 1999, p. 223). Khwaja worked hard to build a robust administrative and financial system, establishing a bureaucracy that organized tax collection and bolstered the state's finances. His wealth was used to fund public structures, including the Nizamiyyah schools, which continued to operate long after his death. Khwaja was also instrumental in shaping the military and political expertise of the Seljuk rulers, Alp Arslan and Malik-Shah, who relied heavily on his counsel.

The portrayal of Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk in the series differs significantly from the historical reality. In the series, Khwaja is shown as a much weaker figure, dependent on Malik-Shah's approval for even minor matters. He lacks the wealth, power, and army that were central to his historical role. For example, the series depicts him personally carrying out the Sultan's orders and investigating traitorous activities, which downplays the actual authority and influence he possessed. Furthermore, the series exaggerates Khwaja's interactions with women, portraying him as frequently consulting figures like Turana Khatun, Bashulo Khatun, and especially Zubeydeh Khatun. In such scenes, he attentively listens to their advice and often follows it, as shown by his affirming body language. In his book, when Khwaja speaks of women, he targets them with harsh and derogatory language and advises Malik-Shah to avoid listening to them or consulting with them. To make his point more effective, he draws on Iranian myths, historical narratives, and even fabricates Islamic Hadith. For example, when discussing consultation with women, he says: "Consult with them and then do the opposite of what they say" (Nizam al-Mulk, 1999, p. 246).

Siyāsatnāma also addresses the role of the Turkomans, a nomadic tribal group whose decentralized power was seen as a challenge to Khwaja's vision of a centralized empire. In the series, Khwaja is shown discussing the *value and importance* of the Turkomans, which contradicts his views in the Siyāsatnāma. In the text, he expresses concern over the uprisings caused by the decentralization of power within Turkoman society and emphasizes that they should be treated as servants to the state to prevent uprisings (Nizam al-Mulk, 1999, p. 139). He advises that the Sultan should maintain the loyalty of these tribes by ensuring their service and loyalty. Khwaja's strategy was to integrate the Turkomans into the state apparatus while reducing their power in order to consolidate control under the Seljuk rulers. The series, however, inaccurately portrays Khwaja as valuing the Turkomans, which contradicts his historically documented approach to managing their loyalty.

The series also introduces elements of Turkic mythology into Khwaja's character, which is a departure from his historical roots in Iranian traditions. In Siyāsatnāma, Khwaja references Iranian mythology to emphasize the legitimacy of the Iranian monarchy, drawing on stories of legendary kings and historical figures. However, the series portrays Khwaja as influenced by Turkic beliefs, such as revering eagles as omens and believing in the mythological power of women in Turkic culture. For example, the series depicts Khwaja interpreting the flight of an eagle as a sign to attack, and features a storyline in which Khwaja's daughter communicates with wolves, a story rooted in Turkic mythology. These portrayals are not consistent with the real Khwaja, who was deeply aligned with Iranian royal traditions and did not adhere to the mythologies of the Turkic tribes.

#### 4. 2. 2. Hasan Sabbah

Hasan Sabbah was born in 1053 AD in Qom to a Shia family (Hodgson, 2005). He has been described as a scholar, politician, jurist, and knowledgeable in religious law, as well as a disruptor of the political power of the Seljuks, a destabilizer of the legitimacy of the Abbasid Caliphate, and the founder of the Nizari movement (Khalatbari & Bastani Rad, 1385 [2006 A.D.], p. 100). As the founder of the Nizari movement, Sabbah's legacy is complex, intertwining themes of religious ideology and political strategy in his opposition to the Seljuk rulers (Khalatbari & Bastani Rad, 1385 [2006 A.D.], p. 116). The narratives surrounding Sabbah's life, as they appear in historical accounts, generally converge on a series of key events: his ascension into the royal court with Khwaja's support, his subsequent exile, brief sojourn in Egypt where he met with the Fatimid Caliph, and his eventual return to Iran, culminating in the conquest of Alamut (Amir, 1380 [2001 A.D.]; Hodgson, 1977).

In various historical books, Sabbah is portrayed as having made strategic shifts from religious preaching to armed conflict after the conquest of Alamut (Khalatbari & Bastani Rad, 1385 [2006 A.D.]). While the Ismailis under Sabbah had yet to fully transition to warfare, the series adaptation depicts his followers as already engaged in conflict prior to this crucial conquest. Furthermore, while historical references stress Sabbah's opposition rooted in a desire to end Arab dominance (Amir, 1380 [2001 A.D.]), the series frames him as primarily opposed to the Turks, reshaping his motivations and alliances. In addition, Hasan Sabbah named every castle he conquered Dar al-Hijra (Allameh, 1397 [2018 A.D.]; Khalatbari & Bastani Rad, 1385 [2006 A.D.]); yet in the series, Dar al-Hijra refers to a dervish's hut where plots against

the royal court are hatched under the guise of prayer and remembrance.

The series characterizes Hasan Sabbah as an *insane* figure, frequently directing his followers to commit suicide, which contrasts with the more calculated portrayal found in historical texts. This representation simplifies the methodology of the Ismaili Fedayeen, who were trained for specific missions that often aimed to eliminate key figures of authority rather than engaging in indiscriminate violence. Historians describe the Fedayeen as rational agents whose targeted killings served strategic ends (Allameh, 1397 [2018 A.D.]; Khalatbari & Bastani Rad, 1385 [2006 A.D.]), which starkly contrasts the sensationalized account in the series, where they are depicted primarily as schemers aligned with foreign enemies.

#### **4. 2. 3. Abu Hamid Muhammad al-Ghazali**

Imam Muhammad Ghazali was born in 1058 AD in Tus and studied under Abd al-Malik ibn Abdullah Juvayni at the Nizamiyya of Nishapur. He gained recognition through debates held under Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk after Juvayni's passing, leading to his appointment as the head of the Nizamiyya of Baghdad in 1091 AD, a position he held for five years (Haj Ebrahimi & Jafari, 1401 [2023 A.D.]). Ghazali's life is generally divided into three stages: the pre-doubt stage, the doubt stage, and the stage of enlightenment and tranquility. At the peak of his fame, he experienced a profound personal crisis – the doubt stage - prompting a withdrawal from public life until 1107 AD, when he embraced Sufism, influenced by his brother Ahmad (Ahmadvand, 1395 [2016 A.D.]). In the third episode, the young Ghazali is portrayed as a distressed and

doubtful figure following Juvayni's death, shown in Isfahan, conversing with Khwaja Yusuf al-Hamadani<sup>1</sup>. This interaction illustrates Hamadani as a key figure in awakening Ghazali's passion for Sufism. The series characterizes him as preoccupied with worldly desires by saying, "After Juvayni's death, while everyone was mourning, I was preoccupied with the thought of attaining the position of leadership. I am ashamed of having such a worldly desire", illustrating his internal conflict as he grapples with worldly ambitions. The series simplifies his journey, depicting it as if his doubts are quickly resolved in just a few minutes of conversation with Hamadani. This suggests that he abruptly turns towards Sufism in his youth, overlooking the complexity and depth of his intellectual struggles and spiritual quest.

Historically, he urged the masses to fulfill their obligations and not to approach rhetoric and philosophy (Rezvan, 1389 [2010 A.D.]). The young Ghazali opposes philosophy, yet he learned philosophy to refute the philosophers. His critiques of philosophy, particularly in his renowned work *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa*, demonstrated a clear dismissal of the ideas presented by philosophers such as Ibn Sina (Vafayi, 1396 [2018 A.D.]). Moreover, Ghazali was a strict proponent of Shari'ah law and its application in society (Sedghi, 2010), emphasizing the king's role in enforcing religious principles and possessing a reputation for being somewhat dogmatic in his beliefs (Haj Ebrahimi & Jafari, 1401 [2023 A.D.]). His views on women were often conservative, aligning with traditional Islamic interpretations that restricted their roles in society (Ghazali, 1939, p. 150). He draws upon tales from

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1. Khwaja Abu Yaqub Yusef al-Hamadani, born in 1048 AD in Buzanjird near Hamadan is recognized as the ninth Sheikh in the Naqshbandi Golden Chain and the first of the 'Khwajagan'—the Masters of Wisdom of Central Asia.

Iranian mythology and accounts from the caliphs of the Sunni tradition to criticize women's traits and speaks of the necessity of staying away from and not consulting them (Ghazali, 1939, p. 157).

In contrast, the series presents a dramatized and altered depiction of Ghazali's character and views. In the fourth episode, Ghazali is depicted as suggesting that the general public should seek knowledge through reason in a debate with Batinis, contradicting historical records of Ghazali's warnings against engaging deeply with thought. In the tenth episode, he is seen praising philosophical ideas during a discussion with Khayyam. The portrayal of Ghazali in the eleventh episode further deviates from his historical adherence to Shari'ah law; rather than conforming to the legal tradition that regarded the testimony of two women as equivalent to that of a single man, he recognizes the testimony of Turna Khatun as equal to a man's. Finally, in the twenty-second episode, Ghazali is depicted anxiously searching for Turna Khatun in the Dar al-Shifa, wanting to consult her about an important issue. As she speaks, he listens attentively, bowing his head in a gesture of respect, which starkly contrasts with his historically conservative views regarding women.

### 4. 3. Women

In analyzing the representation of women within the context of Turkic society, particularly as illustrated in the series, it is crucial to differentiate between historical realities and the mythological narratives that shape these portrayals. Historically, Turkic women engaged in horseback riding, hunting, and even warfare (Sayyadzade, 1390 [2012 A.D.], p. 43). However, this participation did not equate to having equal rights with men. While women

could sometimes engage in social and economic matters, their rights were generally limited (Sayyadzade, 1390 [2012 A.D.], p. 44). Although women showcased their capabilities and skills, they were never able to dominate men or possess rights equal to theirs. This situation was part of the social structure of the time. The historical status of women is often depicted through a patriarchal lens in various texts. Works such as *Qabusname*, *Marzbannama*, and *Siyāsatnāma* describe women as largely marginalized, with few rights and little influence in matters of state. Such depictions suggest a context where even noblewomen, despite some privileges, remained heavily subordinate to men, revealing a societal structure where women from lower classes had even fewer rights and opportunities.

Myths surrounding Turkic heroes, particularly those of women, according to Ögel (1993), depict them as formidable figures in the legends of ancient Turkic peoples such as the Kyrgyz, Altai, and Uighurs. In these epics, women often manage household affairs and act as primary supporters of their husbands, demonstrating bravery by joining men in hunting and standing guard against threats. Tales like *Cañıl Mirza* of the Kyrgyz and *Nuzugum* of the Uighurs feature female heroes who exhibit courage equal to that of male protagonists (Çobanoğlu, 2003, p. 101). Prominent figures, such as Manas's wife, represent the ideal woman in their culture, and characters such as Afrumiye in *Dânişmendnâme* embody similar qualities. These female heroes possess power, authority, and bravery comparable to their male counterparts' qualities. Additionally, in Turkic creation myths, a woman named Ak Ana serves as an inspiration for the creation of the earth and humanity, further emphasizing the significance of women in these narratives (Çobanoğlu, 2003, p. 101).

The series depicting this historical period dramatizes women like Terken Khatun and Zubeydeh Khatun, along with ordinary women, with notably enhanced agency. When the intrigues of women in the palace reached their zenith, Melik-Shah summoned his wife Zubeydeh to address the women's issues in the palace as Khatun-Başı<sup>1</sup>, introducing her as: "The shadow of the one coming is so great that she will effectively handle this position", and "She can issue commands in the absence of the Sultan". She is portrayed as a strong leader, capable of ordering military supplies and confronting male soldiers, asserting, "Woman and man are one in this family", and "The Seljuk women are the iron fists of the Seljuk State, wrapped in silk cloth"! Historical studies indicate that Zubeydeh did not possess much power or wealth and did not play a role in decision-making (Sayyadzadeh, 1390 [2012 A.D.], p. 57). Similarly, a guard at Kuel castle comments on Turna Khatun's warrior skills, stating, "She is a Turkic girl. They are excellent warriors", and "She is like a delicate and beautiful flower, yet strong and valiant", which is a sentiment echoed by foreign men. Malik-Shah's confrontation with Taj-ul-Mulk over striking a woman showcases the mythical status of women, as he declares, "How dare you raise your hand against a woman in my name and disgrace my honor? I will sever the hand that is raised against a woman"? This highlights the honor attributed to women, even from ordinary backgrounds. The depiction of women in the series serves to reinforce enduring cultural ideals from Turkic myths, diverging from the grounded experiences of women who often faced subservience.

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1. Head of Women's Affairs at the Palace

#### 4. 4. Concepts

##### 4. 4. 1. Homeland and Country

The concept of *homeland* in historical Persian texts traditionally embodied notions of residence, birthplace, and emotional ties, contrasting sharply with contemporary interpretations associated with a defined nation-state marked by a defined flag and official language. In Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk's writings, the term 'homeland' denotes an individual's primary place of life, indicating their ethnic and familial connections rather than political affiliations. Characters like Malik-Shah and Khwaja in the series frame discussions of homeland within political contexts, indicating modern notions of a nation-state where territorial integrity and national identity are paramount by saying: "If all the men of the homeland were beheaded and their blood spilled, the flag would still not fall to the ground!" and "Greetings to the dervishes. May your gaze be upon your steps as you walk towards your homeland (striving for its success and glory)".

A review of the series reveals that the term *country* is used only four times across thirty-four episodes. The first two instances come from Ghazali during the trial of Sanjar. He states: "The great Prophet of Islam has said that all non-Muslims living in a Muslim country under the protection and control of Muslims have the right to be safeguarded from various forms of enmity and oppression from foreigners". He further adds, "When an individual spies in a Muslim country and commits acts of treason, they are no longer under the protection of the law". While the word country is not present in either *Siyāsatnāma* or *Nasihāt al-Muluk*, both of them discuss governance in Iran. It is essential to note that in the series, country is employed in a contemporary sense that reflects the

modern notion of a nation-state: a distinct territory defined by borders, populated by citizens, and governed by an authority.

#### 4. 4. 2. State and Government

The concept of *state* historically referred to a governmental or royal system based on blood, land, and nobility, centered around a ruling person or family that acquired power through inheritance or military conquest (Scott, 2017). Today, a political organization known as a state is defined as having a specific territory, a settled population, a legal system, and a government that exercises its sovereignty through law and civil institutions. Modern states strive to provide social services and guarantee individual rights and freedoms (Scott, 2017, p. 186). In ancient Persian texts, the term state carries two distinct meanings: first, in the sense of happiness, triumph, fortune, and luck; second, in the sense of sovereignty and governance. Dalir, in an article that examines the concepts of governance and state in *Siyāsatnāma*, considers the state, in Khawja Nizam's view, as an objective that is attained by the king through preventing oppression and tyranny, gaining the affection of the subjects, creating prosperity and development, acknowledging royal customs, establishing good rules, and so forth. As Dalir (1395 [2016 A.D.]) states: "When a government can actualize other meanings of state, such as fortune, happiness, and wealth within society, it has been able to attain statehood". In essence, from the perspective of advice literature such as *Qabus Name*, *Nasihāt al-Muluk*, and *Siyāsatnāma*, state and government are not separate concepts but are used in a single sense. However, in the series under study, state and government are considered two separate concepts that correspond, respectively, to state and government in contemporary thought.

In the first episode of the series, Malik-Shah tells his mother, who asks him to take care of himself and refers to him as the pillar of the state: “The state existed before us and will exist after us. If we are not here, there are descendants from our lineage who will ascend to the throne and preserve the state”. In another instance, when Malik-Shah, in a dispute with Khawja, refers to himself as the state, Khawja says: “The state is neither you nor me. The state existed fifty years before us and will remain for several more fifty years”. He then advises Malik-Shah to think of the state’s well-being and to refrain from seeing Ahmad (Sanjar) and to not pursue the matter of the son who was separated from him at birth for the state’s safety and well-being. The term state in this narrative refers to the Seljuk state and foreign rule during this particular period; this concept aligns with the meanings of state and government in the contemporary era, not with how it is used in texts from this historical period. State and government, from Khawja Nizam’s perspective (considered Malik-Shah’s mentor) and Ghazali’s standpoint, were concepts tied closely together in meaning. They believed that, within the Iranian mythological framework, the king was the possessor of divine glory and the shadow of God on earth.

During the Seljuks, two different attitudes towards governance existed among the Turkmens and Iranians, competing against one another. Turkmens, with a tribal mindset, viewed governance as a shared responsibility among clan nobles. Conversely, in the framework of the Iranian monarchy, power was centralized in a ruler endowed with divine glory, perceived as the shadow of God on earth with absolute authority. This ideology was primarily supported by Iranian bureaucrats, revealing the conflict between Turkoman commanders and Iranian Viziers. Initially, the Seljuks had a limited perspective focused on tribal traditions. However,

over time, particularly after the period of Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk, the tribal mindset intensified, despite the bureaucrats' efforts, leading to the weakening of their position and continuous conflicts among the Seljuk princes and commanders, ultimately diminishing the Seljuks.

In the series, characters like Turan-Shah and Tekish rebel, in their quest for the throne, and collaborate with both internal and external enemies of the Seljuks. Historical records, like *Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh* and *Jami' al-tawarikh*, reveal that brothers and cousins during the Seljuk era rebelled to prevent the power centralization stemming from the Iranian political model, which conflicted with Turkmen tribal customs (ibn al-Athir, 1993; Rashid al-Din, 1983). Malik-Shah aimed to centralize authority based on Khwaja Nizam's teachings by diminishing local powers, which led to discord among tribal leaders. However, in the series, a tendency is observed towards centralized power and rebellion for the crown by figures like Turan-Shah and Takash, contrasting historical Turkmen governance, which preferred the preservation of dispersed, tribal power. Thus, the series reflects characters' inclination towards centralization, contradicting the historical realities of Turkmens who resisted the concentration of power.

#### 4. 4. 3. Turks and Seljuk Soil

The concept of being Turk in the past often related to ethnicity and tribal identities, and it was primarily defined through language, culture, shared traditions, and occasionally through blood relations or attachment to a specific geographical area (Kara & Çatma, 2017). In contemporary times, being Turkish signifies having a national identity within a modern nation-state like the Republic of

Turkey, or as a part of a diverse and multicultural society. This concept encompasses the recognition of a shared history, a modern understanding of citizenship, and belonging to a country with specific borders and laws (Kara & Çatma, 2017, pp. 340, 341).

The series under study begins with the line: "... in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the saga of the Seljuks and the great state of the Turks was being inscribed in the pages of history". From the outset of the narrative, the land, state, power, and historical brilliance belong to the Turks. The word Turk is heard hundreds of times throughout the series, mostly by enemies. Aside from instances praising the swordsmithing, horses, and warrior skills of the Turks, in all other references, it is used in its contemporary nationalistic sense. Examples include:

For years, the Turks have invaded Byzantine territory and put everyone to the sword ... They have come very close to us. Until today, we have hidden in the castle and defended ourselves; but we will turn the land of the Seljuks into a sea of blood, Our dark enemy is the Turks, and Malik Shah is the ruler of the Turks, Death to Malik Shah! Death to the Turks!, and Drink, my heroes! As if you are drinking the blood of the Turks!

In the series, the term *land of the Seljuks* or *Seljuk soil* is used 48 times in various episodes, both by Turks and by their internal or external enemies. Importantly, every instance where this term is mentioned also refers explicitly to the Turkish identity of the Seljuks. The implication drawn from these two observations is as follows: The Seljuks are Turk. The land of the Seljuks includes Isfahan, Khorasan, etc. Thus, the mentioned land belongs to the Turks; a conclusion that resonates in the audience's mind even though it is never explicitly stated in the series. *Iran* or *Iranian* terms are never mentioned.

#### 4. 4. 4. Newruz and Ergenekon

The celebration of Nowruz in Turkey does not have a long history. From the establishment of the Republic of Turkey in 1923 until 1991, Nowruz was not officially recognized. During this period, articles would appear in newspapers around March 20, labeled as *the ancient Iranian festival* or *the national holiday of Iran*. (Cumhuriyet Newspaper, 1930; 1931; 1933; 1936; 1937; 1942; 1945) rather than a recognized cultural practice within Turkey. Amidst the efforts of the Kurdish population in the 1970s and 1980s to elevate Nowruz as a cultural celebration, linking it to the tale of a heroic figure overcoming tyranny<sup>1</sup>, the Turkish government's severe response revealed the festival's political implications concerning ethnic identity and autonomy (Yanik, 2006). This tension culminated in violent clashes, reflecting the fraught relationship between Kurdish identity and Turkish nationalism.

Following domestic and international pressures in 1991, the Turkish government begrudgingly acknowledged Nowruz, framing it as part of the current national identity while attempting to dilute its ethnic significance. In an effort to reconnect Nowruz with Turkic heritage, state narratives leaned heavily on the Ergenekon legend, an emblematic myth of rebirth and unity for the Turkish people. Embracing this ancient festival could help enhance Turkey's political legitimacy and cultural influence in the Middle East and among Turkic-speaking countries in Central Asia.

In the twenty-third episode of the series, Malik-Shah says, "Nowruz ... the beginning of spring ... the day our ancestors

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1. They linked the arrival of spring to the story of Kaveh the Blacksmith and Zahhak, celebrating the day Kaveh triumphed over Zahhak's tyranny as Nowruz.

melted the iron mountains and broke free from captivity ...” and Khayyam confirms these words. This statement refers directly to the Ergenekon legend, particularly set during the Seljuk era, highlighting the themes of resurrection, freedom, and the rebirth of the Turkish nation. This appropriation illustrates the ongoing struggle for cultural ownership, as characters declare connections to historical legends to redefine Nowruz as an essential component of Turkish heritage.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusion

The analysis of *Awakening: The Great Seljuks* reveals a misrepresentative approach toward Iranian history and figures, evident in the manipulation of identities and characters like Khwaja Nizam al-Mulk, Ghazali, Khayyam, and Hasan Sabbah, showing a lack of respect and empathy. In cases reflecting the historical tendency of Iranians towards centralism and the Turks’ inclination towards decentralization in governance, the attribution of Iranian historical beliefs and traditions to the Turks is observed. Additional examples include: the celebration of Nowruz, the arrival of spring, references to Seljuk Turkish territories instead of Iran, and the narration of the legend of the Three School Friends<sup>1</sup>.

Considering the characteristics of the narrative, discrepancies in time and location, concepts, and characters are analyzed. In each of these instances, significant differences are observed between historical sources and the series’ narrative. The aggregate of these

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1. The series highlights the legend of Khayyam, Nizam al-Mulk, and Sabbah as classmates who pledged to support each other’s rise to power; however, this account is historically inaccurate, as their ages and geographic circumstances would not have allowed for such a relationship.

discrepancies leads to the conclusion that we encounter anachronism in the narrative. Therefore, the first result of the narrative analysis of the series demonstrates the existence of anachronistic elements: a phenomenon arising from attempts to impose contemporary values and concepts onto a markedly different historical and social context. Ideological appropriation of history usually relies on anachronism, wherein concepts of a specific historical period are imposed upon another. Discussions surrounding Nowruz and linking it to the historical experiences of Turks, presenting women's rights and freedoms in a contemporary manner, referencing a legal age above eighteen (Sanjar), utilizing the term Turk in a nationalistic sense, differentiating between state and government in modern terms, addressing the centralization of Turks in landholding, representing an internal enemy such as Hasan Sabbah as an embodiment of absolute evil, and a Sufi interpretation of religion are all examples of anachronism and presentism in the narrative.

Moreover, the series' narrative is teleological, selectively presenting historical events, which lead to a predetermined conclusion in order to glorify Turkic rule. The lands represented are portrayed as belonging to the Seljuks, the characters are depicted as Turks, and their perspective, despite being skewed, reflects a Turkish-centered view of historical events. Consequently, these events unfold within the context of Turkish rule, with specific ideas being attributed to Turks for the first time. For instance, figures like Melik-shah are depicted as pioneers of law, presenting him as the first ruler to address women's rights through legislation, the architect of an accurate calendar driven by his sense of justice and civic responsibility, and the unparalleled defender of the Sacred Quds, Islam, and its sacred artifacts. The alteration of the

timing of historical events, such as referencing the Crusades during Melik-Shah's reign, serves to enhance his image as a powerful leader and defender of faith against such adversaries. In this scenario, events are selectively chosen, interpretations are biased, artificial connections with history are fabricated, and emphasis is placed on specific conclusions.

Additionally, the narrative delineates 'us' and 'other', seemingly to define an ideal collective identity. Such narratives presented to the general public illustrate our identity, the type of people we aspire to be, and the characteristics attributed to others. For instance, the portrayal of Hasan Sabbah's Shiite identity is cast in a negative and villainous light, depicted through scenes filled with bloodshed, treachery, and crime, accentuated by dark hues, fire, and ominous music. This imagery emphasizes Sabbah's enmity towards Sunnis, contrasting it with the perceived cunning of the Byzantines and Crusaders. Their repeated failures and inability to strategize are portrayed alongside the gallant treatment by the Seljuks, who extend kindness toward foreign prisoners, encouraging their embrace of Islam. Moreover, the narrative highlights the enemies' submission to the Sultan, showcasing the simplicity of the courtiers' lifestyle. Such contrasting representations are further emphasized by the acknowledgment, from both foreign and domestic adversaries, of the elusive power and intelligence found in political maneuvering. Ultimately, the positive attributes and victories are reserved for the Turks, while adversaries remain ensnared in incompetence and negative qualities.

Furthermore, the narrative integrates mythology. Mythological motifs occasionally emerge as true living history of the Turks and at times redefine identity within a historical context. A prominent

example is the use of the legend of Ergenekon, presented as a lived history, not merely a myth, and linking it to Nowruz. Historical records show that Turks have traditionally recognized Nowruz as an Iranian custom, and this is explicitly evident from articles published in the Turkish press during the 1940s and 1950s. Essentially, the association of Nowruz with the Ergenekon legend is a politically charged and very recent phenomenon, which is less than thirty years old. As detailed in the segment on women, the female characters of the series embody mythological rather than historical traits. The representation of mythology in historical series can help strengthen identity and foster national sentiments among viewers. These representations may also forge a stronger emotional connection between audiences and their national history and culture, as mythological tales are integral to a nation's collective memory. In the end, it can be said that the narrative of *Awakening: The Great Seljuks* is entirely constructed; it serves as a vehicle for constructing national identity through historical retelling and anchoring elements of national identity within collective memory.

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All authors contributed equally to the conceptualization of the article and writing of the original and subsequent drafts. All authors have seen and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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This article was not authored by artificial intelligence. The authors used ChatGPT in order to edit parts of the text and enhance the readability of the text where necessary. After using this tool/service, the authors reviewed and edited the content as needed and take full responsibility for the content of the publication.

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