

IMPRESSIONIST INDICATORS OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN 19th CENTURY ISTANBUL IN ARABA SEVDASI

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Abstract: This article analyzes the novel *Araba Sevdası* (The Carriage Affair; 1897) by Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, an important figure of 19th century Ottoman-Turkish literature, in the context of impressionism. Because The Carriage Affair centers on an Ottoman youth infatuated with the West, it is often interpreted through the clichéd dichotomies of East–West or tradition–modernity. However, a closer reading of the novel reveals that it reflects the everyday life of late Ottoman Istanbul through an impressionist aesthetic. In this context, the protagonist Bihruz Bey emerges not merely as a caricature of Western obsession but as a representative of a sociocultural transitional space shaped by class-based desires, conspicuous consumption habits, and the dynamics of modern urban life. Described as the turning point of the transition from romanticism to realism in Ottoman-Turkish literature, The Carriage Affair is a novel that is agreed to be realist in terms of form and style, but one cannot decide whether it is romantic or realist in terms of content. In this article, which evaluates The Carriage Affair as an “impressionist” novel outside the realist-romantic context in which it is commonly positioned, it is argued that Recaizade Ekrem depicts the sociocultural life of Istanbul, which changed and transformed under the influence of France in the second half of the 19th century, in a manner similar to the impressionist painters’ canvases with disintegrating contours and tries to present “blurred and moving pictures” of everyday life.

Keywords: Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem, *Araba Sevdası*, Istanbul, Paris, modernization, impressionism.

Araba Sevdası’nda 19. yüzyıl İstanbul’unun Gündelik Yaşamına Dair İzlenimci Göstergeler

Öz: Bu makale, 19. yüzyıl Osmanlı-Türk edebiyatının önemli isimlerinden Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem’in *Araba Sevdası* [The Carriage Affair; 1897] adlı romanını, izlenimcilik bağlamında incelemektedir. *Araba Sevdası*, Batı hayranı bir Osmanlı gencini merkeze aldığı için genellikle Doğu-Batı ya da gelenek-modernlik gibi klişeleşmiş karşıtlıklar üzerinden yorumlanır. Oysa roman dikkatli okunduğunda, geç dönem Osmanlı İstanbul’unun gündelik yaşamına dair sahneleri izlenimci bir estetikle yansıttığı ve bu bağlamda romanın başkışisi Bihruz Bey’in sınıfsal arzular, gösterişçi tüketim alışkanlıkları ve modern kentsel yaşamın dinamikleriyle örülü sosyokültürel bir geçiş alanının temsilcisi olduğu anlaşılır. Osmanlı-Türk edebiyatında romantizmden realizme geçişin dönüm noktası olarak nitelendirilen *Araba Sevdası*, biçim ve üslup bakımından realist olduğu yönünde uzlaşılan, ancak içerik itibarıyla romantik mi yoksa realist mi olduğuna tam olarak karar verilemeyen bir romandır. *Araba Sevdası*’nı yaygın olarak konumlandırıldığı realist-romantik bağlamın dışında, “izlenimci” bir roman olarak

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değerlendiren bu makalede; Recaizade Ekrem'in, 19. yüzyılın ikinci yarısında Fransa'nın etkisinde değişip dönüşen İstanbul'un sosyokültürel yaşamını, izlenimci ressamların konturları dağılan tuvallerine benzer biçimde resmettiği ve gündelik yaşama dair "bulanık ve hareketli tablolar" sunmaya çalıştığı savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem; *Araba Sevdası*; İstanbul; Paris; modernleşme; izlenimcilik.

Introduction

This article aims to make visible the impressions of the daily life of Ottoman Istanbul, which underwent a process of modernization and secularization in the 19th century, especially after the Tanzimat, through Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem's (1847-1914) novel *Araba Sevdası* [*The Carriage Affair*; 1897]¹. Recaizade Ekrem, who wrote works in many genres such as poetry, novels, stories, theater, essays, memoirs, and criticism, has two important works, *Talim-i Edebiyat* and *The Carriage Affair*. Although Recaizade Ekrem's theorizing, which earned him the title of “master”, has taken precedence over his novelist identity, there is no doubt that *The Carriage Affair* is at the center of the accumulation of research on him in criticism. This novel, which is characterized as the turning point of the transition from romanticism to realism in Ottoman-Turkish literature, is a work that is agreed to be realist in terms of form and style, but it is not entirely decided whether it is romantic or realist in terms of content. Ahmet Hamdi Tanpınar (1988, p. 293), one of the most important critics of 19th century Ottoman-Turkish literature, characterizes *The Carriage Affair* as a novel that “claims to be realist” rather than actually being realist. Orhan Okay (2008 [1969], p. 198), on the other hand, points out that there is an “implicit reality” in this novel in which a narrative based on observation is adopted in the descriptions of characters and places. İsmail Parlatır (1995, p. 255), although he finds *The Carriage Affair* “realist” in terms of depictions of space and people, emphasizes that romanticism is more effective. İnci Enginün (2007, p. 253), who evaluates the novel on the scale of these two movements, defines *The Carriage Affair* as a work that does not depart from the romantic style and bases this opinion on the most important feature of romanticism, namely the principle of imitating nature. At this point, however, he overlooks the fact that romanticism focuses on nature untouched by culture and tends more towards the mysterious. However, *The Carriage Affair* is an “impressionist” novel in the sense that it focuses on the landscapes of Istanbul, which underwent great changes under the influence of France in the 19th century, the speed of urban life and the vehicles such as cars, steamboats and trams that facilitate this modern lifestyle (Sazyek, 2024, pp. 27-28).

Impressionism, first seen in the art of painting and then reflected in literature, was born as a result of the discussions that took place after the exhibition opened by painters such as Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Alfred Sisley, Pierre Auguste Renoir and Edgar Degas on April 15, 1874² at the studio of photographer Nadar on the Boulevard Capucines (Tunalı, 2013, p. 37). At the center of the debate was Monet's *Impression-*

¹ This novel has not yet been translated into English. All quotations are my own translations.

² Opened on April 15, 1874, the first exhibition ends on May 15, 1874.

soleil levant (Impression, Sunrise; 1873)³. This painting in motion, in which nothing can be seen but flickering colors and light waves melting into each other, was subjected to heavy criticism during its exhibition. On April 25, 1874, the journalist Louis Leroy wrote an article titled “L'Exposition des impressionistes” (The Exhibition of the Impressionists) in the humor newspaper *Le Charivari*, where he was an art critic, in order to mock this painting, arguing that even a sketchy piece of wallpaper looked more complete than Monet's painting (Leroy, 1874, p. 80). Soon, however, the principles represented by this painting, which bears the name “impression”, found a great resonance in literature. Writers who look at nature through the eyes of impressionist painters focus on fast-moving figures or the fastest means of transportation of the period, such as horses, cars and steamboats, in order to bring asymmetrical and undulating effects similar to the vibrations of light in nature to the page surface of the text (Pischel, 1981, p. 617). The disintegrating, dissolving, evaporating forms on the canvases of Impressionist painters correspond to a culture in transition (Bocquillon, 2005, pp. 9-10). Impressionism therefore becomes the most appropriate tool for artists seeking to define the nature of intercultural interaction or cultural change. In *The Carriage Affair*, Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem makes visible the rapid transformations of late 19th-century Ottoman society through an impressionist aesthetic focused on urban architecture, daily practices, transportation, and clothing (Sazyek, 2024, pp. 27-28). Impressionist writers explore the effects of light on objects and people, capturing fleeting moments and often portraying the world's fragmentation under sunlight through shifting shadows and rippling colors (Jotham, 2015, pp. 73–74). For example, Periveş is described with very light blonde hair and wavy dark yellow eyes; when she enters the sunlight, a dazzling, wave-like scene of light and shadow emerges (Sazyek, 2023, p. 6). This portrayal integrates Periveş into the landscape, making her part of it and emphasizing constant flux. Impressionist authors treat characters as part of their surroundings, showing how colors shift continuously across their trembling bodies. For example, when Bihruz sees Periveş on a ferry, thinking she is dead, his body trembles from head to toe; the color of his face shifts from red to yellow, then to green. His heart pounds violently, his head reels in horror, his vision blurs, and his body quivers (Sazyek, 2023, p. 7). Upon realizing that Periveş is actually alive, Bihruz undergoes a significant emotional and physical transformation. This physical dissolution reflects a wider social disintegration (Kronegger, 1973, p. 64). Bihruz's involuntary reactions mirror the misty atmosphere of the Üsküdar ferry pier, a scene also captured by Halil Pasha,⁴ the first representative of Turkish impressionism (Şahin Tekinalp, 2011, p. 192). The painting depicts the lively pier with rowers, drifting boats, people talking on the dock, and a steamboat emitting smoke. Instead of realistic detail, it conveys mood, atmosphere, and the effects of sunlight on water through edgeless brushstrokes. Societally, this image symbolizes disintegration, shown by boats drifting

³ Monet painted this painting from the window of a hotel in Le Havre in 1873, but later mistakenly dated it as 1872. For this reason, most sources assume that the painting was painted in 1872, a mistake that has persisted to the present day (Powell-Jones, 2016, p. 64).

⁴ *The Carriage Affair* is the first novel published with illustrations within the Ottoman geography. Nine of the twelve illustrations in the novel were created by Halil Pasha. Diran Çırakyan, one of the regular illustrators of *Servet-i Fünûn*, contributed to *Araba Sevdası* with three illustrations. The first depicts Bihruz and Keşfi Bey talking under a tree; the second shows Bihruz wandering alone in the countryside after believing that Periveş has died; and the third portrays Bihruz visiting Keşfi, only to be mistreated by his servant (Şahin Tekinalp, 2011, pp. 185–204).

in different directions and asymmetrical shadows stretching under the same sun. Personally, this fragmentation appears in Bihruz's uncontrollable responses of eyes, mind, and body (Sazyek, 2024, p. 182). Similarly, *The Carriage Affair* is among the earliest Turkish and even world novels to employ the stream-of-consciousness technique (Moran, 2001, p. 84-85), but the narrative style resembling stream of consciousness in fact derives from an impressionist "écriture artiste,"⁵ meaning an impressionist writing style characterized by cultural dissolution and fragmentation within the language itself (Sazyek, 2024, p. 232). This style expresses both the fluidity of individual perception and mirrors societal disintegration along with the complex relationship between individual and community during the rapid transformations of late 19th-century Ottoman society. Thus, *The Carriage Affair* does not offer a clear ideological message but emphasizes movement, impermanence, fragmentation, and perceptual ambiguity. Recaizade Ekrem's portrayal of Istanbul evokes impressionist techniques with fast-moving carriages, crowded streets, open-air conversations, and fleeting impressions. This fragmented narrative reflects a change in how individuals relate to everyday life. Bihruz Bey emerges not just as a "Western admirer" but as a conflicted subject trying to understand his cultural and social environment. His sensory intensity represents personal fragility and new perceptual modes shaped by Istanbul's accelerating modernization. In this way, *The Carriage Affair* transcends a superficial critique of Westernization and becomes an impressionistic urban novel that expresses the transformation of Ottoman society through atmosphere, motion, and ephemeral imagery.

In this article, which analyzes *The Carriage Affair* with an "impressionist" approach, it will be revealed that R. Ekrem depicts the daily life of Istanbul, which has become a city of speed, crowds, joy and mobility, like a painter and tries to present picturesque messages to the reader. In the first part of the article, the close relationship of impressionism with French culture and its journey from France to the Ottoman Empire will be discussed; in the following sections, the impressionist indicators of the changes in the daily life of the Ottoman Empire will be made visible through *The Carriage Affair*.

1. Impressionism's Connection with French Culture and Its Extension to the Ottoman Empire

The 19th century was a period of great social and cultural transformations, especially in Europe. The reason for this is that the Industrial Revolution, which started in the mid-18th century, gained momentum in the 19th century with the effect of many technological inventions. The emergence of fast means of transportation such as trains, automobiles and steamboats, the invention of electricity, major developments in iron and steel production, and the influx of rural residents to the city to work in factories not only enriched the social structure but also paved the way for the development of a vibrant and dynamic understanding of art (Gunderson, 2009, p. 8). Impressionism emerged as a result.

Impressionism, which emerged in France during the rise of the Industrial Revolution and which, beyond being an art movement, is "the name of a period culture" (Tunali, 2013, p. 38), focuses on the growth of Paris, which transformed into a living organism

⁵ The writing used in *The Carriage Affair* also serves the function of reflecting the figure's mind through language (Parla, 2002, p. 137).

by undergoing a socioeconomic and sociopolitical restructuring process, and the speed brought about by this growth. This understanding of art, which is a product of the change in the social structure of the city's shell, tries to overcome the trauma of being defeated by Prussia by focusing on the industrial and recreational areas of Paris with the consciousness of being a nation with a growing industry. This is the reason why the French called the period from the end of the Prussian war in 1870 until 1900 "La Belle Epoque" [Beautiful Age] despite the severe economic conditions (Şenyapılı, 2011, p. 56). Described derogatorily as "La Babylone Moderne" [Modern Babylon] by the Prussian press during the war years, Paris indeed became the capital of entertainment and culture with its cafes with bands, marketplaces, theaters, dance halls, circuses and hippodromes (Bartolena, 2004, p. 70). Napoléon Bonaparte, who was re-elected in 1852, declared himself emperor and took the name "Napoleon III", initiated a major urban transformation process. The emperor, who wanted to achieve an appearance befitting the capital and the size of the palace, had the narrow streets of the medieval neighborhoods, which had been the scene of popular uprisings in the past, eliminated; thus, boulevards with wide avenues emerged (Bartolena, 2004, p. 64). Paris takes on a completely different appearance with its modern buildings, wide boulevards, avenues and public parks. This period also witnesses many "Universal Exhibitions"[Exposition Universelle] where technical and technological developments are introduced.⁶ The steel tower named "La Dame de Fer" [The Iron Lady] built by Alexandre Gustave Eiffel especially for the entrance of the exhibition coinciding with the centenary of the French Revolution, which was initially unwanted but later became the icon of the capital, constitutes the most important projection of the effort to transfer the artistic taste and creative talent of the society, which hoped for resurrection, to the industrial field. After the construction of the tower, more tourists than ever before flocked to the streets and cafés of the city. This glittering life of Paris also fascinated Ottoman writers. Halit Ziya Uşaklıgil (1969, p. 261), a student of R. Ekrem, who followed the publications on the preparations for the Paris General Exhibition in 1889 with great interest and likened himself to "poor people trying to appease their hunger by looking at the windows of restaurants", also went to Paris on the occasion of seeing the exhibition. Impressed by the city's size, order and ostentation, this young Ottoman writer is astonished by the Eiffel Tower:

Especially the Eiffel Tower, which was a wonder of the time. One night, at an unexpected moment, this three-hundred-meter iron tower was suddenly painted with red flames by an electric current, and when the thousands of people standing in a heap underneath it let out a cry of horrified astonishment that they could not help, it shook my bones, which were trapped in that crowd (Uşaklıgil, 1969, p. 263).

As can be seen, with more than twenty thousand gas lanterns illuminating the streets and avenues, Paris is transformed into a city of mesmerizing beauty with its glittering nightscapes created by crowds and flowing traffic (Bartolena, 2004, p. 64). The use of electricity helps to create the image of the "city of light". It is no longer modern life that gives Paris its shape; on the contrary, life is designed according to the modern vision of Paris (Artun, 2013, p. 53). In such an environment, some painters, in search of new pursuits, began to go beyond the traditional rules and ateliers to create paintings full of social motifs such as breakfasts, picnics, promenades, and boat trips (Schapiro, 2013, p.

⁶ These exhibitions were organized in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889 and 1900 respectively (Şenyapılı, 2011, p. 57).

16). It was not only painters who could not remain indifferent to the process of conveying the modern life of Paris in the context of everyday life; it was also writers who adapted their motifs to language and used the pen as a brush to depict the cityscapes of their time in the finest detail (Lethbridge, 2011, p. 534).

Kronegger (1973, p. 32) describes literary impressionism, in which the impressionist city was modeled verbally, as “a Parisian movement with cosmopolitan character”. However, despite its close connection to French culture, Impressionism extends beyond its borders to the Ottoman Empire. R. Ekrem, one of the most important writers of Ottoman-Turkish literature, writes his first and only novel, *The Carriage Affair*, in an impressionistic style and depicts the growing, crowded, fast-paced and glittering life of Istanbul, which underwent both a cultural and urban transformation in the 19th century, just like a painter. In this way, the Ottoman social life of that period is visually recorded in all its vivid dynamism. Philip G. Nord (2000, p. 3), who thinks that depicting modern life with its tensions is also a political statement, characterizes the impressionists' ironic works that challenge tradition as “an anti-capitalist stance” against the existing social order. However, the most important formulas of the Impressionists to heal the society sickened by modern life are to catalog and make visible the situations that cause deterioration instead of producing solutions. R. Ekrem, instead of criticizing the tensions of the modernizing Ottoman society, gives his message in the most direct way by holding up a mirror to the process of urbanization, industrialization and cultural change of the society, that is, by showing it to him. As a writer sensitive to the issues of the society he lived in, R. Ekrem does not only make use of impressionism as a style in which he tries to capture the blurred and ephemeral images of painters; he also visualizes the dizzying speed of change that manifested itself in areas such as entertainment, clothing, fashion, music and architecture with the *Gülhane Hatt-ı Humayun* proclaimed in 1839, and the moving world of time and space that began to become increasingly dangerous, presenting, as he states in the preface of the novel, “a cautionary mirror of events and human situations” (R. Ekrem, 1897, p. 1). However, he conveys the change as the reality of city life beyond sensory impressions. Cities always undergo similar changes, but what makes the impressionists different is that they visualize this process and transform the modern city into an image (Clark, 1984, p. 66).

In *The Carriage Affair*, where he focuses on scenes of everyday life, R. Ekrem presents four different perspectives on the impressionistic (visible) indicators of the changes the Ottoman Empire experienced in social, political, economic and scientific fields. The first three of these include character-driven representations of the “commodification of leisure time”, “bustling crowds” and “conspicuous consumption”, while the fourth is oriented towards “industrial cityscapes” that convey the idea that civilization advances through science and technique.

1.1.Commodification of Leisure Time

Tending to establish a balance between leisure and consumption, or more precisely, explaining how the two have become interdependent, the impressionists try to make the interdependence between “leisure” and “consumption” visible by conveying the action of modern life through urban landscapes. Impressionist aesthetics does not merely represent leisure and consumer culture but transforms everyday urban scenes into sensory fragmentation, fleeting impressions, and a visual spectacle, turning them into an aesthetic project. Therefore, the commodification of leisure is not only a sociological

phenomenon but also an aesthetic strategy. Promenades, gardens, and public squares cease to be mere backdrops and become dynamic scenes where light, movement, and social interaction intertwine. What makes these scenes specifically impressionist is not just the crowds or commerce but how they are depicted. Instead of narrative cohesion, sensory impact is prioritized, and rather than static description, atmospheric details are foregrounded to create visual snapshots.

For this reason, impressionists focus on gathering areas and tree-lined promenades in the city. *The Carriage Affair* begins with the description of the Çamlıca Municipal Garden⁷, which is extremely incompatible with the urban fabric of Istanbul and attracts all eyes with its Western appearance, which resembles the boulevard gardens of France. Built with a modern understanding, Çamlıca Garden is positioned in the novel as an important social space preferred by those who want to relax and fully enjoy outdoor entertainment. The narrator, who looks at “the woods surrounded by a wall with a bird's-eye view from above” (R. Ekrem, 1897, p. 3), attempts to paint this landscape area, which is surrounded or framed, like a painting with impressionist techniques. This painting made with words describes the experience of “leisure time” because “on Fridays and Sundays, which are days for rest and sightseeing, thousands of spectators, men and women, who come from distant neighborhoods of Istanbul, the Bosphorus and other districts in cars, animals and sometimes on foot, as well as from places considered close to Çamlıca such as Üsküdar, Kadıköy, Beylerbeyi, rush to the garden” (R. Ekrem, 1897, p. 6). This is also consumption-oriented because in this garden, where entrance is paid, there are “kiosks built to sell food and soft drinks” (p. 5); “vendors such as pudding vendors, ice cream vendors, lebleb vendors, amusement vendors, pistachio vendors, candy vendors, bagel vendors - which are never absent from any recreational center” (pp. 71-72); or “a casino belonging to the garden” (p. 5). All this not only reflects the pleasure of both visual and gastronomic consumption in an impressionistic style, but also alludes to the monetization of “leisure time” entertainments that daily life, especially modern city life, offers to people of all classes and that have become almost addictive in society.

According to Lefebvre (2012, p. 35), leisure time, which is a part of everyday life, refers to the time set aside for recreation and relaxation outside of professional, familial and social obligations and obligations. In *The Carriage Affair*, Çamlıca Garden, which becomes a landmark of the Ottoman capital rather than a natural area, is depicted as a “place of leisure” where young men, who are fond of pleasure and entertainment, as well as women, who are more interested in such entertainment than men and who started to be seen in public spaces in the 19th century, flood. In the novel, although the garden is built on a large area, it has difficulty in accommodating the crowds. This situation “forces some of the people to leave the garden as others enter.” (R. Ekrem, 1897, p. 6). The

⁷ The development of Çamlıca first began in the 17th century, when Murat IV built a wooden pavilion called “Bağ-ı Cihan” here. A wooden palace built by Mehmet IV and many fountains were later added to it. The richness of the Çamlıca hill in terms of natural water resources and the beauty of its air paved the way for the construction of many summer mansions spread over two hills over time. However, the distance of the neighborhood from the city causes it to maintain its vineyard and garden character for a long time. In the first half of the 19th century, Çamlıca, where large mansions and new roads were built, revitalized considerably with the effect of the park opened during the reign of Abdülaziz. The 19th century's first “garden parties” and the masquerade balls, the first of which was given by Abdülaziz, were always organized here. In the evenings, it became “fashionable” for the elite to walk from Büyük Çamlıca to Küçük Çamlıca and watch the sunset (Aslanoğlu, 1972, pp. 44-45).

“stampede of people coming and going” (p. 6) from both gates gives the garden the impression of a large beehive. This garden, where women “stroll about in the brightest, most beautiful colors” (p. 6), is conveyed as a spectacle composed of movement, light and color.

As can be seen, R. Ekrem, who keeps a visual record of the period by depicting the dynamic face of nature, people and the city, turns to the areas where the rhythm of the city is the highest in *The Carriage Affair*, and to the depiction of landscapes that emphasize the fun life there and the connection of the changing entertainment typology with consumption. One of these important scenes of depiction is the panoramic view of the bustling crowds in Beyazıt Square on the twelfth Friday of Ramadan and the world of leisure where the basic behaviors of social life have begun to be determined by capitalism:

The trays and molds of tradesmen such as bagel vendors, muffin vendors, mustard vendors, and pide vendors; the exhibits of peddlers selling cups, plates, and crockery; the chairs and braziers of foot barbers; the pots and baskets of black women selling dolma; and the hundreds of mansion carts lined up in rows to take away what was coming out of the mosque and the exhibition had made the square impassable. Close to noon, many thousands of people, men and women, filled the mosques, squares, and big streets, and many of the rented carts, carrying decorated ladies, were circling the square, one after the other. (R. Ekrem, 1897, pp. 162-163)

In the passage above, Beyazıt Square, which has become a place of eye-catching pleasure, is depicted as a free space for shopkeepers and consumers and a center of leisure for the crowds.⁸ Therefore, it contains important observations that Ramadan entertainment has also become a capitalized industry. The Ottoman historian François Georgeon (2018, pp. 7-9) points out that Ramadan is a “visible” signifier and can be read like a painting, thus providing a lens through which society can be seen more clearly. However, this “exceptional signifier” that completely changes the city's skyline also changes and transforms after modernization. For instance, mahyas, which had previously been hung only between two minarets, began to be hung between the masts of Ottoman navy ships anchored in the Bosphorus and Golden Horn in the 19th century, or on the facades of official offices to symbolically show the power of the state. Thus, Istanbul becomes a “city of lights” like Paris. The mysterious and fascinating landscapes created by the effect of the moving light emanating from the colorful lanterns in the hands of the crowds taking to the streets for a stroll provide the Impressionists with the material they most enjoy depicting. R. Ekrem, who tries to visualize his anxiety about the accelerating, multiplying and increasingly unknowable reality through characters trying to hold on to the dizzying speed of changes, focuses on Ramadan festivities and crowded promenades such as Kalpakçılarbaşı, Beyazıt Square, Divanyolu, Şehzadebaşı, where Ramadan is still celebrated. What R. Ekrem really wants to emphasize with the description of these spaces, which he reserves a special place as the space of commercialized life and forms of leisure, is the bustling crowd of modern life, which is also the main subject of impressionism.

1.2. Moving Crowds

The most important characteristic of people and objects in motion for impressionism is that they appear blurred and indicate social disorder (Rubin, 2015, p. 90). One of the

⁸ For detailed information on the architectural and social transformations of Beyazıt Square after 1860, see: (Yeşilkaya, 2007, pp. 35-39).

central concerns of Impressionism is the representation of modern life as fragmented, ephemeral, and disordered. In this context, moving crowds become a visual and symbolic expression of urban chaos and social fluidity, encapsulating both the aesthetic and ideological foundations of the movement. Impressionist painters, instead of rendering fixed and detailed individuals, often chose to depict crowds as blurred masses, using indistinct brushwork to convey the loss of individuality in the modern city. Similarly, in literature, crowds are not merely descriptive backdrops but indicators of modernity's destabilizing effects on social structure and perception.

Reflecting the ambiguous and blurred character of modern life, the moving mass corresponds to urban people living haphazardly in a hurry, and is also related to social freedom. Richard Thomson (2004, p. 82) characterizes the crowds that are the result of the growth of cities as an indicator of mass unrest. According to him, crowds that can move like a single body are perceived as a "dangerous" social formation that cannot be controlled. Therefore, a sociopolitical criticism, albeit symbolic, is hidden in the moving forms of impressionism (Clark, 1984, p. 3). Seeing corruption as a social disease, impressionists tend to visualize the manifestations of this corruption with moving crowds. The image of the crowd, which represents the dissolution of the contours in Impressionist painting, also emphasizes the blurring of cultural and class boundaries. For this reason, in the novel, the joy of the crowd in Çamlica Garden disturbs Bihruz, who represents the upper class and the ruling class of the Ottoman Empire. In Çamlica Garden, where Bihruz carefully prepares and arrives on Sunday when he thinks he will meet Periveş, he encounters people who drink Çamlica's water and eat sardine fish, spend time playing backgammon, enjoy a hookah, and open their hearts by admiring Istanbul from a high point. The noise and laughter of the people who come to the garden in droves from the morning hours and fill all the chairs are mixed with "the rough sound of a fine instrument consisting of a bad violin, a mean lute, a cold clarinet, and a badger tambourine" (R. Ekrem, 1897, p. 72). Bihruz, "when he arrives in his magnificent carriage and sees Çamlica in this state and view, he becomes quite angry and extremely annoyed" (p. 72). Bihruz starts to walk towards the hill, but is unable to move forward due to the crowd, and as he comes face to face with "one of the hundreds of spectators with blue knee pads, red sashes, tight pants, baggy pants, baggy underwear, damask cardigans, nightgowns, jackets on their shoulders, coats on their arms, he gets tired of this situation and says, "What is this? Is this a carnival?" (p. 74) All of this reflects the fear and anxiety that life would be lived in public during the repressive rule of Abdülhamit II (Clark, 1984, p. 207). The carnivalesque image represented by the unorganized crowd in Çamlica Garden, on the other hand, indicates that a revolution is underway.

1.3.Pretentious Consumption

In Impressionism, consumption is not merely an economic phenomenon but an aesthetic experience. Conspicuous consumption, especially through clothing and the display of branded items, transforms the individual into a "visual object." Thorstein Veblen's concepts of the "leisure class" and "conspicuous consumption" explain this process. In Recaizade Mahmut Ekrem's *The Carriage Affair*, the character Bihruz Bey functions as a typical Impressionist flâneur who wanders among the city's shop windows and ultimately becomes an extension of those displays. Bihruz's clothing, accessories, and shopping habits align with Veblen's theories and reflect the Impressionist idea of the "person as image." Recaizade continuously depicts Bihruz through brands, textures,

colors, and ornamental details, paralleling Impressionist painters' tendency to portray figures as integrated entities constructed through their surroundings. This section demonstrates how conspicuous consumption operates not only as a sign of modernity but also as a visual strategy within the Impressionist aesthetic.

In Impressionism, the main character of modern urban life is the idler, the dandy, who moves among the crowds like a flâneur. In *The Theory of The Leisure Class*, published in 1899, Veblen argues that the biggest factor in the objectification of people and their transformation into anonymous crowds is the "pretentious consumption" of the idle class, which is a part of leisure time. This group, which consumes for show and does not need to work at all, stands out especially with their expenditures on clothing (Veblen, 2015, p. 149). Bihruz, the main character of *The Carriage Affair*, is a person who lives to consume, not to work. Moreover, he does this consumption not for his basic needs but for showing off. The influence of French fashion reaching the Ottoman Empire through illustrated magazines distances Bihruz from his core values. The most important purpose of wasteful ostentatious consumption is to impress the public, whom the exhibitionist has to please (Veblen, 2015, p. 165). Bihruz, who tries to show his difference in the crowd by consuming objects extravagantly, takes great pleasure in the public seeing his ostentatious consumption style. Bihruz, "in his very tight dress, sometimes dark and sometimes light, depending on the fashion of the season, his honey-colored gloves, his tiny fez, the high collar of his Frankish shirt standing straight up, and the long sleeves of his shirt covering more than half of his hands from the wrist down" (R. Ekrem, 1897, p. 11), turns into a decorative object that appeals to the eye. For the Impressionists, a person's dress is more important than the person (Rubin, 2015, p. 313). For this reason, Bihruz is depicted as an aesthetic object in the novel. Bihruz's transformation into a visual object of consumption displayed in the shop window is also understood from the way he sits in the Çamlıca Garden with his *Terzi Mir* branded overcoat, which are the projections of industrial symbols in the novel, his *Herald* branded shiny boots, his silver cane with the initials of his name (M.B) on it, and his enameled watch, sitting in the place closest to the door and throwing it on the chair so that the [Terzi Mir] brand on the inside of the collar of his overcoat is visible. This gesture of Bihruz to show his status to his surroundings becomes more important in a period when the lower class imitates the upper class in terms of clothing (Veblen, 2015, p. 116). The label on the lapel of his overcoat distinguishes him from a well-made imitation garment and becomes the most important indicator that determines the boundaries of the class to which he belongs. The ornamental elements in women's clothes or men's coats do not only reflect the existing tastes of the period; they also represent the technology in fabric dyes and industrial garment production. Fashion and habits changing in direct proportion to the speed of technology lead to radical changes in aesthetic taste values. This structuring that the phenomenon of consumption has undergone expresses that it is no longer material objects that are consumed, but "signs and symbols" (Orçan, 2008, p. 23).

Bihruz, who determines his daily life by displaying the objects he owns rather than social interaction, and even turns himself into an object of visual consumption, has an insane desire to consume the best and newest of everything. The most striking expression of the "new" here is, of course, the desire for what is "fashionable" (Hauser, 1984, p. 351). Fashion is an integral part of modern life. For this reason, Impressionist writers record in minute detail the fashionable men and fashionable women at picnics, cafes and theaters, the characteristics of entertainment and dress, and their economic aspects. For

instance, Bihruz visits Herald, the shoemaker, and Mir, the tailor, and orders “a pair of potins, a pair of espadrilles, two sets of costumes, five trousers, two redingots”⁹ (R. Ekrem, 1897, p. 93). As he rushes past Alber Gün, the most famous department store of the period, the shopkeeper sees Bihruz and runs after him, telling him that new products have arrived and selling him “a dozen shirts, two dozen socks and handkerchiefs, eight or ten ties, half a dozen gloves, a walking stick, two umbrellas” (p. 93) for a down payment of seventy or eighty liras. As we can see, in the second half of the century, shopping in the Ottoman Empire became an exciting new urban pastime, while family businesses dominated the world of fashion. No longer only products are consumed, but also the brand image, which is the symbolic value of these products (Veblen, 2015, p. 90). Consumption, which becomes a style of entertainment and recreation in addition to meeting basic needs, ceases to be an economic phenomenon and becomes a sociocultural phenomenon in which fashion and culture melt into each other (Orçan, 2008, p. 24).

The Impressionists are in a symbiotic relationship with the world of “leisure time”, which has become a unique market for the capitalist system that tries to regulate the time of employees outside of work. Their aim is to make visible the relationship between the Industrial Revolution and leisure time. For this reason, they attempt to describe the new world order centered on consumption, which has become the product of the desire for social approval or respectability rather than need (Rubin, 2015, p. 96). However, what is consumed is not only clothing, but time itself. Therefore, showing that he does not need to work by spending his time idle is also a part of “pretentious consumption”. In *The Carriage Affair*, R. Ekrem wants to show that one of the most important changes in the Ottoman entertainment culture is that leisure time is now being consumed as a product. For this reason, he records what Bihruz does in his free time throughout the novel, day by day, even hour by hour. How the capitalist system organizes leisure time can be understood from the “weekly leisure schedule” that Bihruz prepares by dividing time into places:

On Fridays and Sundays, leaving the mansion at seven o'clock, walking around Fenerbahçe, Haydarpaşa, Duvardibi for half an hour each, then arriving at Çamlıca Garden at half past nine, and having fun there until the evening. On Saturdays and Tuesdays, leaving the mansion at the same time, going straight to Göksu, having fun for half an hour, then coming to Küçüksu and waiting there until nine o'clock, and on the way back, stopping by Havuzbaşı and reaching Çamlıca Garden in the afternoon. On Mondays and Thursdays, we will leave the mansion at the usual time and go to Çamlıca and rest there until nine o'clock. (R. Ekrem, 1897, p. 95)

Veblen (2015, p. 149) argues that consumption and the abundance of leisure time serve the common purpose of “displaying what one has”. The fact that money is wasted in the former and time is wasted in the latter constitutes Veblen's justification for dividing the areas of ostentation into “pretentious leisure” and “pretentious consumption”. In the Ottoman Empire, where an austere consumption approach prevailed, this situation inclined individuals who looked at the world through a mystical window towards

⁹ Impressionist writers frequently include elegantly dressed dandy figures in their novels, who stand out with accessories such as monocles, canes, and hats. By the late 19th century, these characters, known as “La Gomme” or “Dandy,” became prominent figures in literature, characterized by their obsession with display, admiration of foreign cultures, and effeminate mannerisms influenced by their reading. These dandies also serve as a subtle critique of the upper class and cultural elites (Gürbilek, 2007, pp. 47–48; Mutman, 2019, p. 237).

wasteful consumption. In *The Carriage Affair*, R. Ekrem, an Impressionist writer, like a social historian compiling countless documents rather than a writer, records all these consumption-oriented collective changes from the present moment that characterizes the modern world in its most direct form.

1.4. Industrial Cityscapes

Impressionist aesthetics do not merely depict the technological transformations brought by the Industrial Revolution; they integrate them into the natural landscape, thereby painting a comprehensive image of modernity. In this sense, train stations, steamships, railways, and harbors are not ordinary spaces for Impressionist painters, but settings that offer new possibilities for visual expression, where the natural and the artificial intertwine. The steamboat scene in Rezaizade Mahmut Ekrem's *The Carriage Affair* is not portrayed simply as a vehicle of transport; rather, it becomes an impressionist panorama shaped by motion, crowd, sound, and smoke. This scene represents a literary counterpart to the visual structure in Impressionist painting, where figure and background merge, and subjectivity dissolves into objectivity. The novel's detailed depiction of human and object flows at the harbor, constructed through elements of light, movement, and noise, illustrates how industrial and urban visual components are reimagined through an Impressionist sensibility. This section will explore how the novel reconstructs the visual grammar of modern urban life by integrating the aesthetic codes of industrial modernity.

The Impressionists pursued an understanding of modernity that included scenes of industry and labor as well as "leisure time." Therefore, unlike the naturalists, they connect art with technology by including a railroad or a factory in the landscape. The most striking example of this impressionist approach in *The Carriage Affair* is conveyed through the depiction of a steamboat moored at the Üsküdar ferry pier. This scene, which urbanizes the landscape, blends the natural background with industrial steam. By emphasizing that ports are not only places of leisure but also important centers of commerce, this representation dissolves and blurs the boundaries between East and West in a manner consistent with impressionism:

The steamer lying in front of Salıpazarı, the smoke billowing out, was the steamer Galaté of the Lloyd Company. Since it had been decided to depart from the port of Istanbul that day, the ferry was surrounded by equal trade goods, various boats, boats and boats carrying the people who had come to see her off. The stampede inside the ferry was a terrifying sight: On the one hand, the noise and clatter of the sailors who were unloading cargo with cranes into the deep dark hold with its open mouth; on the other hand, the struggles and fights of the deck passengers who were pushing and shoving each other to get the most suitable places next to the hold, pulling each other's belongings, rugs, mats, mattresses back and forth, created a turmoil, a hum, a noise inside the steamer that it was impossible for those who had not traveled by steamer before not to be surprised by this situation. (R. Ekrem, 1897, pp. 143-144)

This depiction, which shows the bustle and movement of modern life through a small moment, focuses on the industrial landscape of the city reshaped by technology. Impressionist painters, who thought that industry should also be represented in modern life, were not interested in a station or a harbor as a place of meeting or departure, but in the way the smog that floats into the sky seeps into the life of the city and the shape of locomotives or ships that suddenly appear in this chaos (Gombrich, 1997, p. 520). The

abundance of ekphrastic¹⁰ descriptions in the novel, which means the verbal modeling of visual landscapes of the city, is the clearest reflection of Recaizade's desire to look at Istanbul, to think about it, to capture and reproduce the modernity of the city, even if distorted.

Conclusion

The novel is a document that reflects the social structure of the era in which it was written in every aspect. The second half of the 19th century is the period of disintegration and dissolution of the Ottoman Empire, which had turned towards the West in line with its military, political and administrative goals since the beginning of the previous century, and as a result of this orientation, underwent radical changes under the influence of France, from architecture to garden layout, from food and beverage culture to clothing. Recaizade Ekrem writes *The Carriage Affair* in the atmosphere created by such a process and conveys the indicators of the changing and transforming daily life of 19th century Istanbul in an impressionist style. Just as impressionist painters create their works by observing how objects change shape and color under the distorting effects of sunlight and how contours melt and dissolve, R. Ekrem conveys the sociocultural dissolution of Istanbul through impressionist indicators catalogued as “commodification of leisure time”, “bustling crowds”, “pretentious consumption” and “industrial cityscapes”. All of these signs reflect the fluid and blurred appearances of the moving crowds in the parks, gardens, boulevards or avenues, and even in the transportation vehicles such as ferries, cars and trams, which are the products of industrialization, just like a painting. Thus, by keeping a visual record of the social reality of his time, R. Ekrem brings Istanbul's collective life of nearly one hundred and fifty years ago to the present day with all its mobility.

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¹⁰ The word “ekphrasis” or “ecphrasis”, formed from the Greek words “ek” (out) and “phrazein” (to say or declare), is in the most general sense a verbal representation of the visual. For this type of writing, which aims to bring the image before the reader's eyes and offers highly detailed descriptions, see: (Barnet, 2000, p. 82).

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