

Translating an Ottoman Short Story

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Introduction to Nigâr Hanım (1862-1918)

A prominent and published poet, Nigâr Hanım was one of the leading women writers of her time and had published five poetry books, *Efsus I (Alas I; 1887)*, *Efsus II (Alas II, 1891)*, *Nîrân (Hell, 1896)*, *Aks-i Sadâ (Echo, 1899)*, *Elban-ı Vatan (Tunes of the Homeland, 1916)*, one epistolary novel, *The Phases of the Heart*, numerous *şarkı* [songs] and poems in journals, and worked as the editor-in-chief of one of the most popular magazines of her time, *Kadınlara Mahsus Gazete*. She is often regarded as the first Ottoman woman poet to publish a poetry collection with her name and is also the longest journal-keeping woman in Ottoman history, from 1887 until her death in 1918.¹ In addition to being one of the most erudite and versatile women intellectuals of her time, Nigâr Hanım was at the center of a cosmopolitan network, with connections to the most prominent musicians and artists in Istanbul. She was fluent in eight languages and established herself as a talented piano player, lyricist, writer, and translator. Nigâr Hanım died in Istanbul at the age of fifty-six, due to the typhoid fever in the final year of WWI, before the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the modern Turkish republic emerged.

Nigâr Hanım composed and published all her work in Ottoman Turkish, a language that is defined as the language used by the Turks from 1299 until 1928. Until the concerted westernization efforts in the nineteenth century, this heavily infused language and associated literary styles dominated the literary landscape. In this manner, Nigâr Hanım's work emerges as being particularly significant. Linguistically, she is in command of the *divan poetry* tradition and highly fluent in Persian and Arabic. However, she is equally in tune with contemporary poets in Istanbul and abroad. She admires and emulates her favorite French poets Musset, Lamartine, and Prudhomme, and experiments with secular topics and genres such as the epistolary novel and the short story in verse.

Today, Nigâr Hanım's correspondences and memoirs are widely studied by scholars as they shed light on the cultural life of the late Ottoman Empire, however, her uninterrupted and long career as a poet and writer have largely been neglected. In modern Turkey, especially after the alphabet reform of 1928, her oeuvre, entirely composed in Ottoman Turkish, became largely inaccessible for a nation of readers whose literacy was defined by a different alphabet, word formation, and linguistic ideology. In the English-speaking world, Nigâr Hanım's oeuvre is virtually unknown. Talat Halman's translation of the Nigâr Hanım poem "Tell Me Again" appears in the 1979 edition of *Penguin Book of*

¹ The journals are preserved in the Aşiyân Museum Archives in Istanbul.

Women Poets and in the 2000s collection, *It's a Woman's World: A Century of Women's Voices in Poetry*. Halman subsequently includes the very same poem in a collection of Turkish love poems he co-edited with Jane Warner (2005). In other words, Nigâr Hanım's poetic style and her long and evolving career as a writer have so far been limited to a single and rather brief poem that doesn't truly represent her colorful and rich poetry. As for her prose, "The Blizzard" is the first short story by Nigâr Hanım's to be translated from Ottoman Turkish into English.

The following translation into English will hopefully reignite interest in her rich oeuvre and establish her as a prolific nineteenth-century woman writer.

Translated Story: "The Blizzard"²

Fanny Davis describes Nigâr Hanım (1862-1918) as the "first Ottoman poet to write of emotions she herself had experienced" (231-32). Though it's a short story, we can certainly see this poetic inclination in "The Blizzard" which is a piece about a brief and spiritual encounter with snow. Nigâr Hanım was both a spiritual writer who could navigate the tradition and aesthetics of classical Ottoman poetry, and also a daring humanist who genuinely desired to capture every human emotion, act, and circumstance that she could. She was especially fascinated with natural phenomena such as snow which mostly manifests itself in a Sufi-infused framework, rendering her Romanticism rather devotional.

The translated story, "The Blizzard" was conceptualized as a prose poem, a form that Tanzimat period poets were fond of and at times experimented with, like their French and German counterparts. The alliterations and internal rhymes in the piece are accompanied by Nigâr Hanım's unique amalgamation of transcendental Sufi elements and nature. In the story, the whirling of the snow is like the whirling of the dervishes and the narrator is almost in a transcendental state while watching the whirlwind of snow. The Sufi word *istiğrak*, translated as rapture in here, captures that divine state of detachment from all material things and a state of pure joy. However, that much coveted yet transient moment passes and the narrator descends to the hellish suffering she describes in the closing of the story. Thematically, the story reveals Nigâr Hanım's lifelong fascination with snow. However, in her hands, the blizzard morphs into a story about mental anguish and agony, Sufism and solace, themes that she explored in her writing.

As I translated this story, one of the challenges was to sustain Nigâr Hanım's Romantic and ornamental Ottoman in English. As a polyglot, Nigâr Hanım was a detail-oriented writer and particular yet consistent with her word choices. In this story for instance, one of the recurring words is *nisyan*, an Arabic word that comes from the root, to forget. It is a keyword that unravels the psychological depth of the story, and it's also a bridging concept that connects her psychological state to the external

² Written by Nigâr Hanım (1862-1918) on January 22, 1898, in Istanbul, published in her collection of poetry and prose entitled *Echo* in 1316 (1898), Istanbul.

natural phenomenon, snow. It's used in various forms in the story, as a happy state of forgetfulness for example, one that allows her to transcend the material world defined by pain and agony. I first translated the word as *forgetfulness* even though *oblivion* is a more poetic choice. Forgetfulness initially seemed to me a more direct translation of her state of determination to exist in a different state of consciousness. However, I went with the word *oblivion* in the end, as it matched the overall ambiance of the story, and the religious undertones. In the story, the word *oblivion* used in phrases such as “the wine of oblivion” really reflect the element of “lethe” that she desperately needs. It's a form of forgetfulness that is closely linked to the deliberate yet spiritual loss of consciousness.

Another critical point about the translation was on the subject of religious terms. Nigâr Hanım alternates between “Allah” and “Yarabbi” in the story. I used the Arabic and original word *Allah* instead of translating it as *God* since the story has religious undertones and in the end the narrator even prays to Allah to absolve her of her suffering. However, I translated “Yarabbi” as “God” primarily because the full phrase “ah, aman Yarabbi” is a more colloquial and less liturgical way of expressing her existential state.

As the *İkdam* newspaper article (below) from January 27, 1898, indicates, “The Blizzard” was likely inspired by a real blizzard in Istanbul. The newspaper article mentions that everything in the city came to a halt due to high winds and heavy snow, even boat traffic. That year, winter must have been an exceptionally brutal one in the region since the same newspaper published a brief article entitled “Snow in Baghdad,” noting this unusual occurrence of snow in the far corners of the empire as well. The end of the century was also a tumultuous time in Nigâr Hanım's personal life. Her marriage was over, her health was poor, and she had lost her parents whom she truly adored. Her journals reveal the depths of her corporeal and psychological suffering during this time. In the story, too, the hypnotizing and transcendental elements of the blizzard are juxtaposed with her dark thoughts, and the snow becomes a symbol for the rest, peace, and stillness her soul needs.

The Blizzard

Hurling, hurling. A fierce whirlwind elevates the snow with strident wails and horrifying howls. The snow flakes turn into diamond dust under a ray of sun and are bestrewn to the sky. I can no longer tell if the sparkle-adorned sky is gliding towards the ground or if the ground is soaring up to the sky.

The sky, whose true colour has been veiled by gloomy clouds for over forty hours, has started to reveal its soul-caressing hue here and there. Around the sun, there blossoms a big blue circle. Still, the wind doesn't calm down, it doesn't let go. It shakes and topples all those who, lured by the joyful sun, dare to come out of their home; it knocks them down on the soft, snow-laden earth; it lays them on hills of snow; it compels all who desire to find their way through those hills, to return.

Howling and howling. Rising and roaring, it drags those white, thick, awe-inspiring clouds to infinity. My thoughts, which for a moment were chasing them, suddenly fall, with my inclining eyes, to the ground.

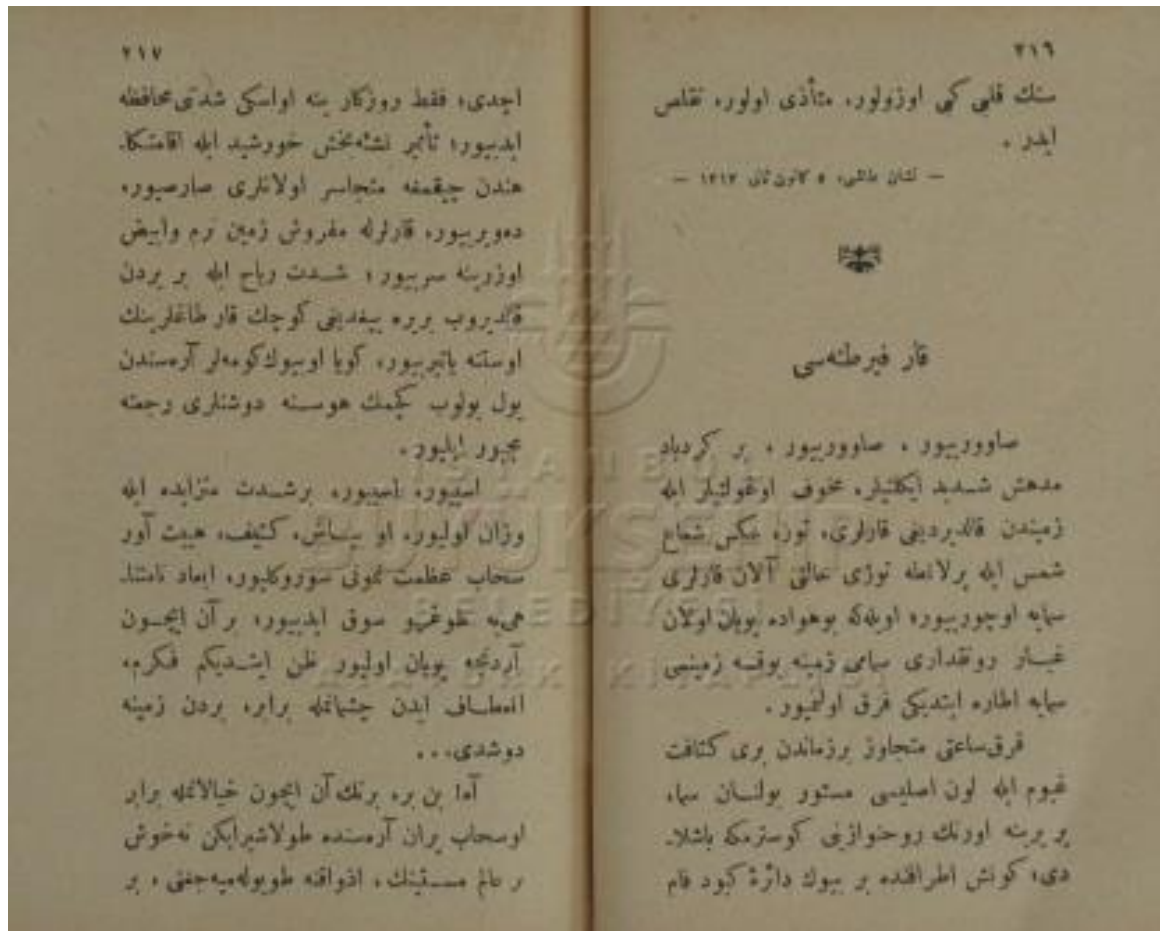
Ah! As I was wandering among those fluttering clouds for a mere moment, surrounded by my dreams, for a second I sensed the endless pleasures of this realm, the divine essence of that world of rapture, and in that second of drinking from the wine of oblivion, my God, how I found myself lost in eternal life! Oblivion, oh, that moment of joyful oblivion among the white clouds! For Allah's sake, betide, elate me; with the spotless luminescence of your hand, lift up the weight of that iron-clad pain that thrusts wounds, blood, grief, destitution onto my chest. Save me from that unceasing thrust that makes my nights sleepless and my days restless; Ah, you, oblivion, the bliss of not knowing! For Allah's sake, come to me; elate me. You, the spirit that flaps its wings to heaven, cover an entire life's bitterness and poison with your soft and golden wings. End the nights of torment, days of anguish, this broken and poisonous life. End it all. You, the soul-soothing lover, you, the only joy of life, only you stay!

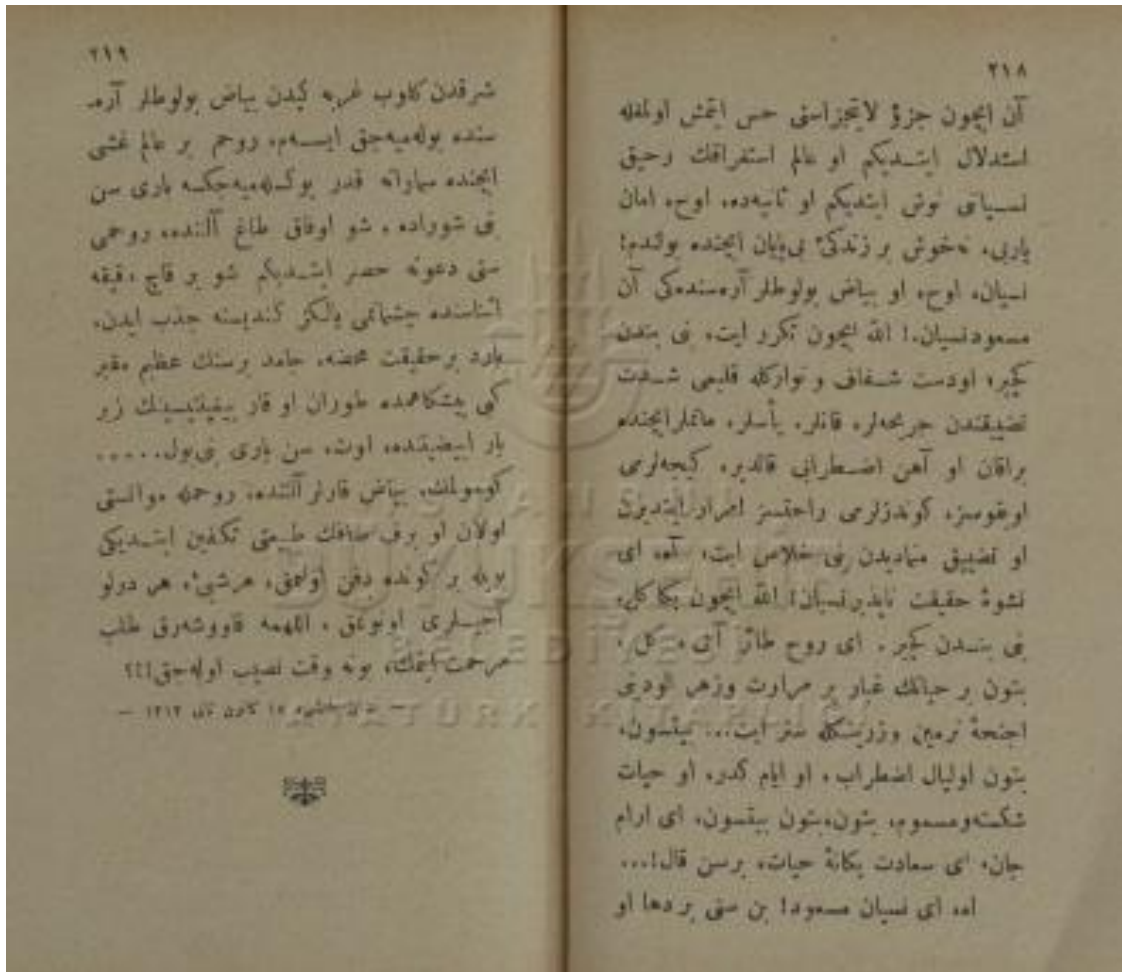
Ah, you, blissful oblivion! If I won't ever find you amidst the clouds that travel from the Orient to the Occident, if my soul won't rise up to the skies again in rapture, then at least you find me here, during these few minutes, as I surrender my soul to you, under this hill, under the weight of this whiteness where the only things that arrest my eyes are those which stand in front me like the cold truth, like a lifeless, tall tombstone.

To be buried, under the white snow; to be entombed on a day like this, when that pure snow which befriends my soul shrouds Nature, to forget everything, all the suffering, unite with my Allah, ask for his compassion...when will that be my lot?

Date: Rumi Calendar Kanunisani 15, 1313 (January 22 of year 1898 in the Gregorian Calendar), Nişantaşı District, Istanbul.







Original texts for *Echo* cover page and the story “The Blizzard”. Public Access: Atatürk Kütüphanesi İstanbul Büyükşehir Belediyesi Digital Archives, İstanbul, Turkey.



شهر مزده شتا
دکز اخباری
اولکی کون صیاحدن انشاء قدر قار وچی
فوق الماده برشدکه امیرای اسکام انکندایدی.
قلط اقام اوسن روزگار دعا رانده انستاد
ایدرک شهر من حلیقه بیسوک بر بورانکه تا
هر یاهسی الله یولتورودی . القسار اوسن
ساعت بریق . ایکدم بولده بورونکه امکان
قلمش ایدی . ملک اولغی ساد کیرنده روزگار
ماده انسانی بوجوروددی . بولده بولان قاروزک
برجیوی یا مأموران اهل شاقه سیه پاقاش
رو روزگارک شتیه سوغش ایدی .
دون صیاح روزگار بر آنستدن شدت اییدی .
بولکه برابر سوققل قارون کیمیز رحله
ایدی . یس برزده قار رتبه از قاضی آقمش
ایدی . تراموا بیلر یه ایشلییدی . اولکی کون
حرکت ایده جیستک اولان واپوز انجیق دون
صیاح شهر مزون انکار ایده یلمشدر .
دولکی کون روزگار اولکی کون له سیه
لوقلر شدت کل ایستاده برووت شهر مزده
برقاج سستون بری امتلی کور لاندش در سیده
شدتیجه ایدی . حق اولده برده برقاج کنی
شدت برووت کمال ایده میرک طوکنه رقی
قلش ایکن اطرافدن شیشه کور قار لشدن .

Ikdam (Effort) Newspaper, 1898 29 January, Rumi calendar: 16 Kanunisani 1313 Newspaper article on page 2 about a blizzard that paralyzes life in Ottoman Istanbul. There is also another short piece entitled “Snow in Baghdad” in the same newspaper issue. This was likely a harsh winter across the Ottoman Empire. Public Access: Digital archive of Ottoman periodicals, included in the Hakkı Tarık Us Collection, currently kept at the Beyazit State Library in Istanbul.

Transcultural, vol. 14.1 (2022), 117-125.
<http://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/TC>

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