Sephardim on screen: History, Representation and Nationalism in two TV series

By

Modiane Lior Zerdoun-Daniel

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Dr. Ines Koeltzsch

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Abstract

In this thesis, I research the connection between historical fiction and nationalism. I do a qualitative and textual analysis two TV shows, *The Club* and *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, to investigate the portrayal of Sephardi Jews and how they are incorporated within a broader national narrative in Israel and Turkey. First, I focus on the different cultural representation, the vision of nationalism, and the portrayal of boundaries offered by both series. Then I examine the role of female characters and the family unit, showing how women are a central part of these representations, and how the family is used as an allegory of the nation.

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1 INTRODUCTION

As someone who generally enjoys history on the one hand and cinema and series on the other, I have always been interested in how televisual media represent history and the narratives they (re)produce. In a time where popular culture is hyperactive and where people have increasing access to diverse and transnational content, storytelling is booming, and historical fiction is a prominent genre[1]. Through subscription platforms, shows like *The Crown*, *Downton Abbey*, *Bridgerton*, *Vikings*, *Outlander* or *Peaky Blinders* are flooding our screens. On a more local level, there were three new fictions about Sissi in the last three years. Now that watching movies and series is not limited to national television anymore, non-English speaking shows like *Elite* and *La Casa de Papel* (from Spain) or *Squid Games* (from South Korea) have had massive international success.

Growing up in a Jewish family, I got acquainted with Jewish cinema early on. However, I realised quickly that much of the produced fiction about Jews that was available was about Ashkenazim, especially when coming from the United States. I was raised in France, a country where over half of the Jewish population has a North African background, therefore there was some representation of non-Ashkenazi Jews in the cinema and on television, yet still more sporadically than the more usual films about the Shoah, where most character were French or Ashkenazi Jews. Hence my surprise when I found out that around the same time, two series focusing on Sephardi Jews were about to be released, *The Club*[2] from Turkey and *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*[3] from Israel, and that none of them had to do with the Holocaust or running away from the Ultra-Orthodox community. On top of that, both shows were to be available on

[1] Megan O'Grady, 'Why Are We Living in a Golden Age of Historical Fiction?', *The New York Times*, 7 May 2019, sec. T Magazine, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/07/t-magazine/historical-fiction-books.html.
[2] *Kulüp*, Drame (O3 Medya, 2021).
[3] *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, Drame (Artza Productions, yes Studios, 2022).

Netflix, a prevalent platform where everybody could watch them, and they were not produced in the USA. I felt a sort of excitement, thinking "Finally, we will see something different, something new." But besides the entertainment provided, some questions lingered: what is the purpose of making and distributing these shows? What do they say about Sephardi Jews? What do they say about Sephardim in Turkey and Israel? What type of nation-building narrative do they serve?

There has been research on Israeli and Turkish cinema. Ella Shohat wrote a groundbreaking study of orientalism and representation of Sephardim in Israeli cinema[4], and Eran Kaplan explained how Israeli movies are produced in a way to be representative of the nation rather than to be blockbusters[5]. Noa Lavie investigated the reception of Israeli TV shows *Shtisel* and *Fauda* in the United States and how the viewers participated in defining their quality[6]. As for Turkey, the role of films and television is a very widely studied topic. Yeşim Kaptan and Ece Agan published a comprehensive overview of Turkish television production and distribution[7]. In the field of history, the historians Pierre Sorlin, Robert Rosenstone, and Jerome de Groot researched how cinema and television deal with history[8]. They looked at the different functions

[4] Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*, New ed., Library of Modern Middle East Studies 78 (London ; New York : New York: I.B. Tauris ; Distributed in the U.S. and Canada exclusively by Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
[5] Eran Kaplan, *Projecting the Nation: History and Ideology on the Israeli Screen* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2020).
[6] Noa Lavie, 'The Constructed Quality of Israeli TV on Netflix: The Cases of *Fauda* and *Shtisel*', *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 18, no. 1 (March 2023): 62–80, https://doi.org/10.1177/17496020221137661.
[7] Yeşim Kaptan and Ece Algan, eds., *Television in Turkey: Local Production, Transnational Expansion and Political Aspirations*, Corrected publication (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-46051-8.
[8] Pierre Sorlin, *The Film in History: Restaging the Past* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes & Noble, 1980); Robert A. Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, Third edition, History (Abingdon New York, [New York]: Routledge,Taylor & Francis group, 2018); Jerome De Groot, *Remaking History: The Past in Contemporary Historical Fictions* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2016).

of historical fiction and how current nations represent their past. On the other hand, Mareike Jenner analysed the new era of transnational television through Netflix[9].

The show *The Club* has garnered some attention from scholars, especially the effect it had on Turkish television, the local Jewish community, and Turkish society at large. However, *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem* was largely ignored by the research. Similarly, research about Sephardim in popular fiction is limited, at least in English-speaking academia, with the exception of the aforementioned work of Ella Shohat. *The Club* and *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem* have never been subjected to comparative analysis and by doing this research I want to contribute to Sephardi studies and bring a new perspective on how popular historical fiction portrays a minority so often neglected in the genre, and how these show place Sephardi Jews in connection to Turkish and Israeli national narratives. This is a project at the intersection of media studies and critical nationalism studies, investigating the role of historical fiction in nationalism. I also chose to offer a special focus from a gender perspective, as historical melodramas are usually meant for a female audience, and women have a particular status within nationalism. Besides, women play a central role in Sephardi communities.

I decided to analyse works of historical fiction because I believe that it plays the role of conveying a vision of the past meant for a mainstream audience. For this thesis, I did a qualitative and textual analysis of fictional audiovisual media content, with a sociocultural and historical contextualisation focusing on the narrative and the symbolic dimensions. I examine two main aspects of the TV series: on one hand, the portrayal of Sephardim as a minority, and on the other hand, how they are incorporated within a broader national narrative in Israel and Turkey. I acknowledge that my limitations in carrying out this project were mostly linguistic,

[9] Mareike Jenner, 'Transnationalising Genre: Netflix, Teen Drama and Textual Dimensions in Netflix Transnationalism', in *Binge-Watching and Contemporary Television Studies*, by Mareike Jenner (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), 183–200, https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474461986.003.0012.

as I am not proficient in either Hebrew or Turkish, however, I have a good understanding of Ladino.

The following chapter discusses and analyses the various theoretical components that I used to analyse the shows, including the relationship between historical fiction and nationalism, as well as the gendered dimensions of it. The third chapter provides an overview of the two series under consideration, as well as a historical backdrop for their narratives. The fourth chapter examines the choices made in the shows regarding the concept of the nation, the boundary-making process, and the role of religion, languages, and cultural aspects in Sephardic representation. The fifth chapter tackles the way female characters, gender-based violence, and the family unit are treated in each show. The sixth chapter will discuss how the series were received in Turkey and Israel. The final chapter concludes with the differences in context and narrative choices between the two shows.

2 THEORETICAL CONTEXTUALISATION

2.1 HISTORICAL FICTION AND NATIONALISM

According to Smith, one component of nation-building is a shared "understanding of the communal past,[10]" which explains why history and its interpretation are such crucial concerns. Every nation needs not only a history but also its retelling, resulting in the development of national narratives that serve political goals. The social scientist Enric Castello analysed the role of fictional stories in nation-building, precisely in the case of the Catalans in Spain[11]. Benedict Anderson demonstrated that the printed press played a key role in nation-building[12], and Castello argues that televisual fiction is used similarly.

Historical fiction is a genre in which a fictional story is put in the context of specific real historical events. It is a work of fiction (rather than scientific or biographical), but it is set in a certain time and place in the past to highlight events, culture, or characters from that age and area. It may depict era changes and shifts, modernisation, and significant developments, or it may evoke a sense of nostalgia for a world that no longer exists. If we look at the educational value, popular fiction can reach a larger number of people than history books. The two are not in opposition, as we need history books to write popular fiction. It democratises the work of academic historians and makes it more accessible to a broader audience. Because it is fiction, it does not explicitly pretend to be real, however, there is a certain expectation that the setting of the story is somewhat realistic. Of course, characters, their personal stories, and interactions are invented and reconstructed, but their behaviours and the world they evolve in should be credible and match the historical knowledge we have about the place and time. I would argue

[10] Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation*, Repr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.
[11] Enric Castelló, 'The Production of Television Fiction and Nation Building: The Catalan Case', *European Journal of Communication* 22, no. 1 (March 2007): 49–68, https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323107073747.
[12] Benedict R. O'G Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised edition (London New York: Verso, 2016).

that because it is fictionalised, writers of historical fiction have to make choices on how they decide to represent history, as there are many ways to do it, therefore it is never neutral. The details they decide to represent and those they leave out, the focus they single out, the distortion they allow, all of these decisions matter. Watching historical fiction is a form of pleasure[13] and these productions also aim at creating emotions in the viewers, whether negative or positive about the past and the lesson we draw from it about the present. When we watch a historical movie, we can either feel nostalgia about a time we imagine better, or on the contrary shudder at how terrible life used to be and appreciate the progress our society has gone through. In other words, historical fiction says as much, if not more, about the period we are living in at the moment of their creation than about the period they are representing[14]. Historical fiction also manages to individualise history, like a micro-historical approach to the past. Big events are seen through the eyes of a few individuals rather than a collective[15]. This helps provide a form of identification and makes it easier to relate to the characters of the past, especially when some of their experiences and struggles remind us of the ones we are going through in the present. But it is more than just entertainment because it relies on the use of history and what the production wants to do with it. On one hand, historical fiction can be used to manipulate national narratives and serve conservative ideologies. Some shows rely on already popular figures or events (like *The Crown*) or play into images of the grandiose past to offer a form of escapism[16] (for example *Downton Abbey*). On the other hand, it can also be a way to spread messages of tolerance and diversity. In more recent trends, historical fiction serves to highlight unknown stories and revisit the history of ethnic minorities, women, and LGBT people, and their fights for social justice. It can be a way to bring not only visibility but also knowledge

[13] De Groot, *Remaking History*, 152.
[14] Rosenstone, *History on Film/Film on History*, 17.
[15] Robert A. Rosenstone, ed., *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past*, Princeton Studies in Culture/Power/History (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1995), 57.
[16] De Groot, *Remaking History*.

about less mainstream topics. It can also question the relationship we have with the past and modernity. For example, movies and shows have forced us to reconsider the idea that promoting a diverse society is a recent phenomenon and that historically, ethnic segregation was the norm, when in reality nation-states in the 20th century, through policies, have homogenised populations that initially were not. Thus, historical fiction can either reinforce or challenge nationalist narratives. I would argue that they participate in the creation of what Duncan Bell calls a "mythscape", which he describes as "the discursive realm, constituted by and through temporal and spatial dimensions, in which the myths of the nation are forged, transmitted, reconstructed and negotiated constantly.[17]"

The reason why I chose to focus on TV shows rather than cinema is for several reasons. First of all, TV shows nowadays are increasingly popular and mainstream, especially among the youth. It is more accessible and less costly than cinema. Through Subscription-Video-on-Demand (SVOD) platforms, people can watch shows whenever they want, wherever they want, and for an affordable fee. The second reason is that the format of TV shows allows them to tell longer stories at a more thrilling pace. It deepens the connection between the viewer and the characters and facilitates a stronger attachment. The last reason is that SVOD platforms like Netflix make international viewings more possible. Until recently, people were limited to their local shows on television and occasional imports from the USA or the neighbouring countries which were purchased and dubbed by national broadcasters. Nowadays, SVOD makes accessible hundreds of films and series from many countries, giving people a much broader choice from places they are not necessarily very familiar with.

In the case of *The Club* and *The Beauty Queen*, historical fiction on screen plays a double role: rendering the group visible, and engraving it in another nation's history, respectively

[17] Duncan S. A. Bell, 'Mythscapes: Memory, Mythology, and National Identity', *The British Journal of Sociology* 54, no. 1 (March 2003): 74, https://doi.org/10.1080/0007131032000045905.

Turkey and Israel. Both Israel and Turkey are countries where a relatively high level of nationalism is mobilised in everyday life, by the population, and by the elites. Both countries have strong historical narratives about the Nation. This also impacts media, film, and TV production.

2.2 NETFLIX AND TRANSNATIONALISM

A platform like Netflix appeals mostly to the youth. Therefore, they have to offer content that will speak to that youth and increase diversity and transnationality. If we look at most teenage shows offered by Netflix, they often have similar stories in very similar settings (for example in an upper-class high school). Even when set in different countries, the aesthetics and storytelling are so formatted that they can actually happen anywhere and are not deeply bound within a nation or culture[18]. Cultural and national symbols have almost faded away, except for language. However, historical fiction still has the particularity to be attached to national markers, because it is less generalisable than romance, thrillers, or high school drama. It is supposed to represent events in a framed time and space. Of course, historical shows can still transmit messages of universality and international comprehension, but they are embedded in a national narrative more than most other genres. On the other hand, Netflix is not a national television broadcast and their politics of production and distribution rely therefore on more flexible criteria. This allows the creation of shows that move away from the constraint of national narratives, especially in countries where culture is heavily limited by the government[19]. As an example of these mechanisms, when in 2020 the Polish government was discussing a possible ban on sexual education in schools to "stop LGBT propaganda", Netflix posted huge advertisements for their new season of the British show *Sex Education* all over Polish cities.

[18] Jenner, 'Transnationalising Genre'.
[19] Melis Özbek, 'The Netflix Effect on Turkish Television: New Authors, The Question of Quality TV and Kulüp (2020- 2021)', in *Turkish Cinema and Television Industry in the Digital Streaming Era*, ed. Tuna Tetik, Deniz Gürgen Atalay, and Nilay Ulusoy (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2022), 75–96.

The two TV shows I analysed illustrate these two different tendencies we can witness on Netflix. We can safely assume that the production itself might have impacted the choices of storylines and the transmitted messages. *The Beauty Queen* was produced by the national Israeli network Yes Drama, based on the famous book of the same name written by Sarit Yishai-Levi[20]. Because of its local success, it was sold to Netflix in order to make it available internationally, as a way to export the nation. On the other hand, *The Club* was produced specifically for Netflix, for a national and an international audience. The main author of the show, Rânâ Denizer, wrote the story on a blog, inspired by her own family. She first had contact with producers from Turkish television, but her project could not be carried out because her story did not meet the usual canon of Turkish history, and therefore could not be fitted on national television[21]. For her, Netflix was an opportunity to create a show going against Turkish nationalism. However, even if distributed everywhere like every Netflix production, the show was first and foremost a success in Turkey. In other words, in the first case, Netflix served as an instrument to spread internationally a national narrative, while in the second case, Netflix produced an alternative narrative to the nation with an international intent yet mostly a national audience.

2.3 SPECIFIC CASE STUDIES

"The media therefore function as a categorical system: widespread public identification with the national space is held to be an effect of this form of cultural organisation. Media are boundary markers, intimately related to the 'political roof that caps a culture and makes it into a nation-state[22]."

[20] Śarit Yishai-Leṿi, *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, trans. Anthony Berris, First U.S. edition (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2016).
[21] *Interview with Rânâ Denizer, Co-Writer of Netflix Show "Kulüp" ('The Club') — Melike Yücel-Koç*, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5CxFjXJZtC0.
[22] Philip Schlesinger, 'The Sociological Scope of "National Cinema"', in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. Mette Hjort, Digit. Print (London: Routledge, 2010), 19.

2.3.1 Turkey

In Turkey, the control of the state on national media and censorship limits the scope of what screenwriters and directors can do, especially when it comes to controversial topics. The arrival of SVOD platforms like Netflix became a threat to Turkish media. The Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) tried to implement bans on SVOD in 2019[23] and in 2023 several platforms were fined by RTÜK for offering shows with homosexual characters, "normalising obscenity" and being contrary to "the moral values of society and the principle of protecting the family[24]".

2.3.2 Israel

Israel does not have the same strict control over its media production, however, said media production is still very nationalistic oriented. Israeli cinema is heavily subsidised by the state, which creates a unique approach to production, which is more focused on representing the nation than on commercial success[25]. Television shows have a different dynamic since they also benefit from private funding, however, we cannot ignore the influence of this philosophy. The local production being in Hebrew, it has a limited audience even outside of the country. Nevertheless, since the 2000s, several successful Israeli TV shows, like *Fauda* or *BeTipul*, have reached the United States, but first as American remakes (rather than as dubbed original shows). As for Turkey, the arrival of SVOD changed Israeli production, but in a different way. While in Turkey, SVOD is a competition to national television, in Israel it is an ally to export Israeli television. Netflix for example, has the required budget to buy Israeli production, provide dubbing or subtitles, and market it outside of the country, in order to foster an international audience.

[23] Özbek, 'The Netflix Effect', 76.
[24] Hamdi Firat Buyuk, 'Turkey Fines Major Digital Platforms for "Challenging" Family Values', *Balkan Insight* (blog), 27 July 2023, https://balkaninsight.com/2023/07/27/turkey-fines-major-digital-platforms-for-challenging-family-values/.
[25] Kaplan, *Projecting the Nation*.

2.4 SEPHARDIM IN FICTION

Because Sephardim are a minority within a minority, there is a need for representation and the inclusion of their stories within the canon of Jewish history. The particularity of the Jews is that they are often seen as one nation (and perceive themselves as such). Historical fiction plays a reconstructing role, or as Jerome de Groot put it: "Popular history can challenge models of nationhood and national identity, even while appearing to underline and celebrate them[26]." It helps enforce narratives and myths, but also when it comes to underrepresented minorities, it plays a significant emotional role. I mentioned previously how the individualisation process of cinematographic representation of history gives way to a more intimate identification of the characters and their stories, and I believe this is particularly true for groups that are underrepresented in popular culture.

Worldwide, Jewish fiction is often centred around the Holocaust and mostly Ashkenazi experiences. Ashkenazi history and contemporary life are regular subjects of fiction. Recently, there have been popular shows like *Unorthodox* and *Shtisel.* We can also think of the recent Polish production *The King of Warsaw* (based on the book by Szczepan Twardoch), reviving life in 1939 Warsaw through the original angle of Jewish gangsters. In 2023 came out on Netflix *Rough Diamonds*, a criminal series set in the Orthodox Jewish community of Antwerp. This is without mentioning the number of American productions that have (Ashkenazi) Jewish characters. On the contrary, the Sephardi (in the broader sense, meaning non-Ashkenazi) experience has not inspired as many works of fiction, especially outside of France and Israel, the countries with the largest non-Ashkenazi Jewish populations. The movie trilogy *La Vérité si je mens*! was extremely popular in the late '90s and early 2000s in France. While it was full of North African Jewish representation and made by actors of that background, the comedy

[26] De Groot, *Remaking History*, 70.

contained a lot of clichés and was not necessarily culturally important or honouring, comparable to the Israeli "Bourekas movies[27]." Ella Shohat observed that this type of Israeli movie tends to orientalise or sexualise Sephardim, presenting them in minor roles, as comic figures or people needing to be saved[28]. Considering Sephardim as a sub-ethnic group, creating popular content about their history is a way to bring back a sort of group maintenance, to shape a form of collective cultural memory. As Castello theorised, this type of fiction has a normalisation function, meaning that the minorities presented on screen become part of mainstream culture[29]. The specificity of *The Beauty Queen* and *The Club* is that they both have been written by Sephardi Jewish women, who both drew inspiration more or less directly from their own families. Râná Denizer, the screenwriter of *The Club*, fictionalised her parents, her grandmother, and herself to tell the story of the rise of nationalism in 1950 Istanbul[30]. Sarit Yishai-Levy, the author of the book on which *The Beauty Queen is based*, crafted the plot of her novel using heard stories from her family, which has lived in Jerusalem for eight generations. It is very telling that these two Sephardi shows explicitly rely on family and personal elements, as it brings us back to the process of individualisation and emotional relatability.

The current state of the representation of Jews in popular culture is heavily focused on Ashkenazi Jews, therefore it was rather surprising and noticeable to see the release of two TV shows in 2021 focusing on Sephardi historical fiction. While they are relatively new, they have been treated differently by scholarly work. There have already been studies on *The Club* and the role it played in Turkey and how it impacted Turkish perception of its Jewish community and history, as well as the way gender roles played out in the show[31]. On the other hand, *The*

[27] "Bourekas" are a comedic type of films, popular in Israel in the 1960s-70.
[28] Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*.
[29] Castelló, 'The Production of Television Fiction and Nation Building'.
[30] *Interview with Râná Denizer, Co-Writer of Netflix Show "Kulüp" ('The Club') — Melike Yücel-Koç*.
[31] Senem B. Çevik and Esra Aydın Kılıç, 'Rediscovering Turkish Jewish Heritage: *The Club* as a Teaching Moment in Turkey', *Turkish Studies* 24, no. 5 (20 October 2023): 905–29,

Beauty Queen of Jerusalem has been ignored by academia. There has been no comparative study of both shows and analysis of what they represent for the broader Sephardi community and Israel.

The particularity of the two shows is that they give a representation of the Sephardi minority but not only about their own history, the purpose is to inscribe their story within a bigger one, may that be Israel or Turkey.

2.5 GENDER IN FICTION

These shows qualify as historical fiction, but are also very influenced by melodrama, a genre usually targeting a female audience[32], which can also explain the focus on female characters. In both shows, there are three generations of women represented. Historical shows that tend to borrow from melodrama very often use the same tropes for their female characters. The most obvious one is the archetype of the "strong woman," who goes through hardship but always comes out victorious. Because there are historical elements added to the story, the "strong woman" trope comes with some specificities. First of all, women are often used as allegoric to the nation, because they represent its creation and perennity. In a nationalist ideology, women are responsible for biological, ethnic, and cultural reproduction. Their purpose is to have children with a man from the in-group and to pass down language, culture, religion, values, and symbols to their offspring[33]. Second, because the show is supposed to represent a past that is no more, the hardships the female characters go through have to show relatively bigger adversity than in modern times. Progress and feminism improved the rights of

https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2023.2223994; *Perspectives on Cosmopolitan Istanbul in the Hit Netflix Series, "The Club"*, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OJ2_TfxyqS8; Özbek, 'The Netflix Effect'; Çağla Çavuşoğlu Üstün, 'The Representation of Minority Women in Turkish Streaming Media: The Case Study of Kulüp', *Communication Papers. Media Literacy and Gender Studies.* 12, no. 25 (11 December 2023): 94–104, https://doi.org/10.33115/udg_bib/cp.v25i12.22945.

[32] Gökhan Gökulu, 'Representation of Sexual Violence in Turkish Cinema and Television Series', *Asian Journal of Women's Studies* 19, no. 2 (January 2013): 66–91, https://doi.org/10.1080/12259276.2013.11666149.

[33] Nira Yuval-Davis, Floya Anthias, and Jo Campling, eds., *Woman, Nation, State* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1989).

women in most places; therefore, these shows can serve as a reminder of the long way that has come. Thus, it is common to emphasise all the limitations these characters have specifically because there were women. These shows usually highlight the social and family pressure women went through, the importance of marriage, their limited rights, the questions of pregnancies, and the challenges to getting an abortion, but also the difference of mentality when it comes to gender-based violence such as rape and domestic violence. Of course, this type of show also aims at making bridges with the present, as all the aforementioned issues are improving, yet not completely solved. This means that female viewers can still relate to the struggle of these women while appreciating that some progress has been made. The third feature is that these stories must stand out in order to be intriguing, thus the women are frequently portrayed as exceptionally tenacious, rebellious, and ahead of their time. They tend to embody a certain modernity and pursue iconoclastic goals. They have to be aspirational to be used as role models. This brings us back to the first point about the nation: if the women of the nation are fierce and bold while mastering motherhood, then the nation is in good hands. As we will see, *The Club* and *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem* narrative arcs rely on the trope of "strong women" as main characters, and on the particular role within the community they represent, namely the family unit and the reproduction of the nation.

3 HISTORICAL CONTEXTUALISATION

The Club has two seasons. Set in Istanbul, the first season takes place in 1955 and follows the story of a Jewish woman, Matilda Aseo, who has just been released after seventeen years in prison. Matilda tries to reconnect with her daughter Raşel, who was raised in an orphanage. Raşel has a Turkish Greek friend, Tasula, and a Muslim lover, Ismet. Matilda starts working in a nightclub under the lead of Orhan, a man trying to hide his Greek background, and Çelebi, who seems to know Matilda from before and keeps manipulating her. Matilda becomes close to two of her colleagues, Haci who works backstage, and Selim Songür, the singer and star of the Club. The second season takes place in 1960. Matilda and Çelebi are in a romantic relationship. Raşel and Ismet have a daughter, Rânâ, and are navigating parenthood as well as their complicated relationship. Haci and Tasula get married. The Club is threatened by a dubious landlord, Fikret.

The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem also has two seasons. The whole show is set in Jerusalem. The first season takes place between 1917 and 1941 and portrays the life of a Sephardi family. Merkada Ermosa is the matriarch and owns a delicatessen store with her son Gabriel. Gabriel marries Rosa Siton (against his will), and they have three daughters, Luna, Rachelika, and Becky. Rosa also has a brother, Ephraim Siton, who joins the Irgun and lives mostly underground. Luna is friends with her neighbours, siblings Matilda and David Franco. Matilda gets murdered by Ephraim while dancing with British soldiers, and Luna ends up marrying David. The second season is set somewhere between 1942 and 1945. It is mostly focused on the abusive relationship of Luna and David, as well as on the secret son Gabriel had during an affair with an Ashkenazi woman, Rochel.

3.1 SEPHARDI JEWS

Sephardim are a sub-group of Jews who had settled in the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century and prospered there until their expulsion by the Spanish monarchy in 1492 and the Portuguese monarchy in 1496. After being expelled, they migrated around the Mediterranean Sea, mostly to the Ottoman Empire, the Balkans, the Middle East, and North Africa. They started being called Sephardim and considered a specific diaspora only after they departed from Spain. Under Ottoman rule, they developed the community with specific religious rites and a language called Judeo-Spanish or Ladino. Jonathan Ray defines Sephardim as a subethnic group and a micro-diaspora[34]. For this thesis, I will apply the concept of nation as developed by Anderson, meaning an "imagined political community" to this subethnic group[35]. Sephardim as a whole don't aspire to a Sephardi nation-state, though a significant amount of them are in favour of a Jewish state. However, I believe that considerations about symbolic nation-building and collective identity can be applied to Sephardim as a group, and therefore, to simplify my research, I will use the words nation, community, or group to refer to them.

Among the Jewish nation, Sephardim have a particular position. For a long time, they were considered like the "aristocracy" of the Jews by their Eastern European counterparts[36]. Sephardim were flourishing in Spain before the Reconquista, and until the 15th century had a rich culture and were involved in trade. After the expulsion, they reestablished strong communities in several places and resumed their activities in business and religious institutions. The Jewish people are often seen as "one people", therefore one nation, with one main territorial attachment – namely Israel. However, Sephardim had their own language and traditions, as well as their own territorial and historical points of reference. In North Africa, they mingled with

[34] Jonathan Ray, 'New Approaches to the Jewish Diaspora: The Sephardim as a Sub-Ethnic Group', *Jewish Social Studies* 15, no. 1 (2008): 10–31.
[35] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
[36] Harvey E. Goldberg, 'From Sephardi to Mizrahi and Back Again: Changing Meanings of "Sephardi" in Its Social Environments', *Jewish Social Studies*, Sephardi Identities, 15, no. 1 (Fall 2018): 165–88.

indigenous Jews to the point where both groups ended up being conflated. In contemporary times, the word "Sephardi" can be used in a broader sense, encompassing the aforementioned North African Jews, as well as other groups of Jews coming from Muslim and Arabic countries. In this thesis, unless specified otherwise, I will talk about Sephardim in a narrow sense, meaning the original community that was expelled from Spain and settled in the Ottoman Empire. In the current era, most of these Sephardim live in Israel and to a lesser extent in Turkey, which are the two countries I am going to focus on.

3.2 TURKEY

The Club is a depiction of Istanbul in the 1950s, but the story starts in 1942 with the Wealth Tax (*Varlık Vergisi*). In November of that year, the Turkish Parliament passed a law requiring non-Muslim citizens to pay over 100% (or even over 200% in the case of Armenians) of their assets in a one-off tax. The government pretended that this tax aimed to prepare the Turkish economy in case the country entered the war, however the true reason was to overburden non-Muslim Turks and cause their bankruptcy[37]. This tax ruined rich and poor families alike. People were given two weeks to pay the tax, causing many of them to sell their belongings and borrow money around them. Around 5000 people who were not able to pay the tax were sent to labour camps and were released only two years later once the tax was repealed due to international pressure[38]. This tax is the starting point of the story of Matilda Aseo, the main character of *The Club*, whose wealthy family was ruined because of it. She was born into a wealthy Jewish family and started a relationship with a Muslim man called Mümtaz. Her father paid the Wealth Tax but hid some gold in order to help European Jews escape from Nazism. One of his employees betrayed him and reported him to authorities. Because of this,

[37] Ali Tuna Kuyucu, 'Ethno-Religious "unmixing" of "Turkey": 6-7 September Riots as a Case in Turkish Nationalism*', *Nations and Nationalism* 11, no. 3 (July 2005): 361–80, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1354-5078.2005.00209.x.
[38] Kuyucu.

Matilda's father and brother were sent to a labour camp, where she believes they both died. Later on, she realised that Mümtaz was the one who betrayed her family and killed him. She was sentenced to seventeen years in prison, during which she gave birth to the daughter she had conceived with Mümtaz before the murder. In the show, the plot starts when Matilda is released from prison. Even if mathematically, that would mean she came out of prison in 1960, the rest of the events are clearly set in the 1950s.

Between 1923 and 1945, the newly established state of Turkey had only one major party, the Republican People's Party (Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi). In 1950, their main opponent, the Democratic Party (Demokrat Parti) came to power and then were re-elected in 1954. The DP was a populist and Kemalist party, mostly composed of dissidents from the RPP, who left after disagreements about economic and land reforms[39]. The new government was heavily focused on business and privatisation, as well as expanding its export economy. While the RPP had previously attempted to limit religion's role in order to create a secular nation-state, the DP reintroduced Islam as an important component of national identity, purely for populist reasons[40]. The shift in religious and economic considerations is illustrated in the show when the nightclub where Matilda works begins to fire non-Muslim employees, particularly Greeks. Despite the exchange of inhabitants between Turkey and Greece in the 1920s, a sizable number of Greek Orthodox people remained in Turkey. After 1923, they were awarded Turkish citizenship and achieved constitutional equality with their Muslim counterparts. Even though Turkish was the Republic's only official language, they maintained Orthodox religious practices and spoke Greek at home. In episode 1.03, the Turkish Businessmen Association pays a visit to the managers of the club, and one of them says "I'm glad all workers here are Muslims." One part of the storyline is about the owner of the club, Orhan Şahin. Orhan was born Niko, in a

[39] Kuyucu.
[40] Feroz Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*, The Making of the Middle East Series (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993).

Greek family, but changed his name to pass as Turkish. As he is about to be named "Turkish Businessman of the Year" he does everything in his power to hide his origins. When the economy of Turkey started to decline in 1953, the DP was indeed quick to instrumentalise xenophobia among the population in order to deflect from their responsibility[41]. The first half of the decade also brought a lot of social mobility and urbanisation, with folks from the countryside moving to the cities. This is represented in the show through the characters of Haci and Bahtiyar, who have just arrived in Istanbul and got hired at the Club. While Haci chooses solidarity with his non-Muslim colleagues, Bahtiyar chooses nationalism and takes part in the xenophobic agitations. On top of the complicated economic situation in Turkey, events in Cyprus added to the tensions. In 1954 the EOKA (National Organisation of Cypriot Fighters) was formed and incited an insurgency against the British rule in Cyprus, claiming Cyprus' independence. This added fuel to the fire as Turkey also had claims on Cyprus, and this was used as an excuse to take retribution on Turkish Greeks, also called Rums. After the bombing of Atatürk's house in Thessaloniki, thousands of Turks took to the street on 6 November 1955 to attack their Greek neighbours[42]. This pogrom is shown in episode 1.10. It is estimated that three persons were killed, hundreds were injured, and many houses, stores, and places of worship were ransacked, plundered, and destroyed. The second season of the show is set in 1960. One of the main themes of the plot is the fact that following the riots of 1955 and the destruction of Greek property, as well as the massive move of people from the countryside to Istanbul, a shady estate development business started to bloom in the capital. The Greek population started to feel more and more unsafe, a tendency illustrated by the character of Tasula who decides to move to Athens in episode 2.07. At the same time, authoritarianism grew and towards the end of April 1960, student protests were organised in Istanbul and Ankara. The

[41] Kuyucu, 'Ethno-Religious "unmixing" of "Turkey"'.
[42] Kuyucu.

situation eventually led to a military coup d'état in May 1960. This putsch is also represented in *The Club* in episode 2.10.

The show takes place in the neighbourhood of Pera (now Beyoğlu). It is significant because it was once a diverse district with numerous non-Muslim communities. It was a mix of working-class people, small business owners, and entrepreneurs, and a place where Muslims, Greeks, Armenians, and Jews coexisted and interacted[43].

Turkish Jews emigrated in two waves: after the Varlık Vergisi and after the creation of the State of Israel, with the majority leaving before the 1950s. While the 1942 Tax Law caused the departure of members of the Orthodox community, the majority of Greeks left between 1955 and 1960, with approximately 40,000 of them expelled from the country in 1964[44]. After the 1940s, Jews in Turkey were never formally subjected to discrimination or criminalisation based on their culture or religion. The community persisted, primarily in Istanbul but also to some extent in Izmir. However, Ladino was ignored as a result of assimilation and nationalistic policies, and many Jews eventually abandoned their religious beliefs or converted to Islam, particularly in order to marry non-Jewish Turks.

3.3 MANDATORY PALESTINE

There has been a Jewish community in Palestine for centuries. However, during the Ottoman rule over the region, the Jewish population was very small. This began to change on the eve of the First World War. Historically, Sephardim had made up the majority of the Jewish community in Palestine by a large margin, with Jerusalem as their traditional centre. The Jewish settlers who made up the bulk of the new Yishuv (Hebrew for "settlement"), however, came mostly from Eastern Europe. During the 1920s the Yishuv continued to grow in several waves

[43] yasmineakaki, 'Beyoğlu and Galata: Crossroads of Constantinople', İstanΠόλις, 17 July 2023, https://www.istanpolis.org/post/beyoğlu-and-galata-crossroads-of-constantinople.
[44] Kuyucu, 'Ethno-Religious "unmixing" of "Turkey"'; Ahmad, *The Making of Modern Turkey*.

of immigration from Europe. In addition to push factors, the emergence of modern Jewish nationalism and, in particular, Zionism, also motivated European Jews to move to the "promised land." At the end of the decade, the Jewish population of Palestine numbered 190,000, with a solid majority of Eastern European Jews[45]. This trend continued throughout the 1930s and into the immediate postwar period. In 1917, Lord Balfour, the UK foreign secretary, issued his declaration supporting "the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people[46]." Following military conquest, in 1920 the British installed a civil administration in Palestine, and in 1922 the League of Nations determined that the UK should act as Mandatory and administer Palestine on its behalf. Support by the British imperial state enabled the expansion of the Jewish colonial settlement[47].

In Palestine, Sephardim used to live in social and cultural proximity to their non-Jewish neighbours[48]. Nevertheless, during the last years of Ottoman rule, the young Sephardi elite of Jerusalem, for example, tended to embrace the Zionist project. However, these same Sephardi intellectuals looked with suspicion upon the Ashkenazi Zionist activists migrating to Palestine[49]. This was in part because Sephardi Zionists embraced an inclusive vision of Zionism. That is, they envisioned Jewish national autonomy in partnership with the local Arab population and not against their interests. Ashkenazi Zionists, on the other hand, tended to either ignore the presence of non-Jewish Arab Palestinians or imagine a future without them[50]. The Ashkenazi leadership of the mainstream Zionist movement directed their nationalist struggle against the local Arab population, which they envisioned as competing and hostile—and antagonised them in the process. In 1929, Arabs killed dozens of Jews in attacks, especially in

[45] 'YIVO | Land of Israel', accessed 6 June 2024, https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Land_of_Israel.
[46] Ethan B. Katz, Lisa Moses Leff, and Maud S. Mandel, eds., *Colonialism and the Jews* (Indiana University Press, 2017), 318, https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1zxz145.
[47] Katz, Leff, and Mandel, 320.
[48] Abigail Jacobson, *From Empire to Empire: Jerusalem between Ottoman and British Rule*, Space, Place, and Society (Syracuse (N.Y.): Syracuse University press, 2011), 86.
[49] Jacobson, 87.
[50] Jacobson, 98–109.

the city of Hebron, an event represented in episode 1.08. The attackers did not distinguish between Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and so initiated a process that eventually led to Sephardi Jews siding with the Zionist establishment[51]. The 1930s also saw the rise of an even more radical Zionist movement, the Revisionists, led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. This is the Irgun organisation that the character of Ephraim Siton joins in the show. The Irgun openly promoted retributive counterterrorism to avenge anti-Jewish attacks. Throughout the 1930s it operated as an underground paramilitary force and assaulted Arabs, including random civilians, contributing to an escalation of the conflict[52]. Only in the second half of the 1940s, the Irgun, under Menahem Begin's leadership, began its struggle against the British[53]. This struggle is visible throughout the whole show, as Ephraim and his colleagues keep planning actions against British soldiers.

During the Second World War, the Jews living in Palestine did not go through the same horror as their European counterparts, but it was not ignored either. For example, thousands of Jewish men from Palestine decided to join the British Army to fight in Europe. This is what the character of David Franco does at the end of the first season. Another marking event is the Italian bombing of Tel Aviv in September 1940, which is portrayed in episode 1.14.

Now that the context in which both stories are happening is explained, I will present the analysis of their content.

[51] Hillel Cohen and Haim Watzman, *Year Zero of the Arab-Israeli Conflict 1929*, The Schusterman Series in Israel Studies (Waltham, Massachusetts: Brandeis University Press, 2015).
[52] Tom Śegev and Tom Śegev, *One Palestine, Complete: Jews and Arabs under the British Mandate*, 1. Owl Books ed, An Owl Book (New York: Holt, 2001), 384.
[53] Bruce Hoffman, *Anonymous Soldiers: The Struggle for Israel, 1917-1947*, First edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, a division of Random House LLC, 2015).

4 SEPHARDIM AND THE NATION

The two shows share the same particularity of displaying Sephardi characters within a historical context where they are a minority, rather than trying to represent events shaping the mainstream nation as a whole. However, they have a different approach to nationalism and boundary-making.

4.1 VISION OF THE NATION

4.1.1 Pluralism in *The Club*

In *The Club*, diversity is presented as a positive thing and counteracts Turkish ethnic nationalism. Turkish nationalism is portrayed as bad, but not all Turks in the show are portrayed as nationalists. While Matilda's life was severely impacted by the "Wealth tax" and even if she first planned on moving to Israel, she and her daughter decide to stay in Istanbul and conclude that this is the place where they belong. Matilda also gets the opportunity to move to the USA and refuses it. The purpose of the show is to challenge Turkish nationalism while shining a light on Turkey's treatment of minorities (mostly Jews and Greeks). Because the main characters are Jewish, the show is an interesting piece depicting Sephardi history and culture and celebrating it. Matilda is never depicted as alien to Turkey. Her place might be questioned by some of the characters (the villains) but not by the show itself. She is an integral part of the Turkish nation. The show is very critical of how Turkish elites manipulated ethnic belonging to divide the people and use minorities as scapegoats. Throughout the episodes, we regularly hear the voice of a young boy selling newspapers and screaming headlines. With this process, the show criticises the role of the press in spreading the news, but also state propaganda, and the effects it had. As an example, in episode 1.09, before the riots against the Greeks start, we hear the paperboy announcing: "They bombed the house of our forefather!", a reference to the fact that

that day of September 1955, something exploded in the garden of the Turkish embassy in Thessaloniki, which was also the house where Atatürk was born. The explosive did not cause any damage and was later believed to have been planted by the Turkish secret services themselves, but the media relayed the news as if the house of Atatürk exploded. This garnered anger from the Turkish population and was a trigger for the riots. With a similar intent of denouncing the flaws of nationalism, most of the antagonistic characters are sketchy Turkish businessmen, who flaunt their pride of being Muslim while swindling their compatriots and making dirty money on people's misery. The recurrence of interethnic relationships throughout the show is also a way to take a stance against claims of Turkey as a homogenous Muslim country.

Sometimes, the show draws away from what would be credible in order to be inspirational[54]. For example, in episode 1.10, after the riots, all the workers of the Club, including Tasula, a Greek woman who has just been rescued after being beaten up and raped in the streets, gather around a dinner table to celebrate their friendship together. This scene is by no means realistic, as people were most likely terrified by the events and striving to run away rather than gather with friends from all ethnic backgrounds. But the purpose of this scene is to offer an alternative possibility during times of crisis, like wishful thinking. What if people relied on solidarity, community, and friendship during divisive and violent events?

However, one noticeable aspect of the show is the absence of Armenians. It is possible that including Armenians would have made the story even more controversial and that while Turkey is ready to face its past regarding Jewish and Greek minorities, the treatment of Armenians is still too taboo, and would have made the show less watchable.

[54] *Perspectives on Cosmopolitan Istanbul in the Hit Netflix Series, "The Club"*.

4.1.2 Zionist narrative in The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem

The Beauty Queen is set in Mandatory Palestine, before the establishment of the State of Israel. The entity was not a nation-state, and many distinct groups lived alongside one another. Although the population was predominantly Muslim, many places, like as Jaffa, Haifa, and Jerusalem, had a considerable Jewish community. Because of the mandate, the British army was stationed throughout the territory and held power. So, what vision of nationalism does the show offer? The show clearly takes a stance between "good Zionism" and "bad Zionism." Gabriel is not very involved in politics; however, he identifies as a socialist Zionist and keeps a picture of him greeting Ben Gurion on the wall. The "bad Zionists", the Revisionists, are shown through the character of Ephraim, who joined underground organisations like the Irgun and later Lehi. He is responsible for several murders of British soldiers and is always on the run. Ephraim is an ambiguous character. He is meant to represent a type of extremism that should not be endorsed, especially when he murders a Jewish woman designated as a traitor, yet he is constantly protected as "one of us" by the Ermosa family. The treatment of the Irgun/Lehi in the show is an interesting distortion of reality for narrative purposes. Most of the real members of these organisations, and especially in the leading positions, were Ashkenazi Jews with an Eastern European background. Surprisingly, most of the characters from the underground in *The Beauty Queen* are Sephardim. It is a kind of "sephardisation" of the Jewish nationalist movements. By doing so, they are integrating Sephardim in every part of the national narrative, almost creating an alternative reality where they were as involved in pre-State nationalism as their Ashkenazi counterparts. I suggest that this is in accordance with how this work of fiction participates in enforcing mythscapes[55].

The nation is built in opposition to two main "enemy" groups: the Arabs and the Brits. The representation of Arabs is rather negative. When Rachelika's first love interest, a member

[55] Bell, 'Mythscapes'.

of the Irgun, murders an Arab tradesman for no reason in episode 1.09, she gets really upset and his actions are deemed morally unacceptable. However, throughout the rest of the show, Arabs are often used as a negative point of reference, for example when Merkada implies that only Arabs hit their wives (episode 2.04) or when Gabriel does not want Rosa to sell food in the street "like an Arab" (episode 2.06). As mentioned in the previous chapter, historical fiction can portray real events but make narrative choices that influence the viewers' perception. The depiction of the 1929 riots in Jerusalem is a perfect example of this phenomenon. In episode 1.10, the Ermosa family is attacked by two Arab men during what is supposed to represent the so-called Palestinian riots of August 1929. These anti-Jewish riots were a result of tense dispute around the access to the Western Wall in Jerusalem. However, in the show, the attack is barely contextualised. The Western Wall dispute is briefly mentioned previously, but the violence appears like purely gratuitous and almost coming out of nowhere. On top of that, the fact that Jews attacked Palestinian villages is completely left out. Similarly, the Arab uprisings against the British mandate throughout the 1930s are obliviated by the show, only referred to by British characters lamenting about "Jews and Arabs killing each other." In other words, what is depicted in the show is in itself realistic if we look purely at the actions depicted, but it is not the whole reality and gives us a biased perception of the events.

Based on these examples, I would argue that *The Club* is a critique of national mythos while *The Beauty Queen* reinforces national mythos.

4.2 BOUNDARY WORK

According to Barth, ethnicity is a social process and has to be defined and practiced[56]. Boundaries are meant to differentiate in-group and out-group members[57]. Applying the theory of Weber about symbolic boundaries, that is to say, the crafting of a group differentiation through various lifestyle elements designated as either good or bad[58]; as well as Michèle Lamont's theory that people use symbolic boundaries to distance themselves from other group and build their identity around it[59], I analyse in this chapter how boundary work can be represented differently when creating fiction about multi-ethnic group interactions.

In cinema and television, in works of fiction, the ethnicities of the characters are usually fixed and non-negotiable, unless the topic of the story is specifically about the fluidity or the construction of identity and ethnicity. In *The Club* and *The Beauty Queen*, every character is already categorised: Turkish, Greek, or Jewish in the first case, Sephardi, Ashkenazi, Arab, or British in the second one. There is no room for redefining each group and which individuals belong in which group. However, they are both illustrating different ways of defining the boundaries between the groups.

4.2.1 Reinforcing boundaries in The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem

In *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, there is little interaction with outsiders of the group (including Jews who are not Sephardim), and when there is, the most conservative members of the family judge it as morally wrong. Boundaries are strictly enforced by the family and social control. When Gabriel falls in love with Rochel, an Ashkenazi woman, she is immediately and

[56] Andreas Wimmer, 'The Making and Unmaking of Ethnic Boundaries: A Multilevel Process Theory', *American Journal of Sociology* 113, no. 4 (January 2008): 971, https://doi.org/10.1086/522803.
[57] Janine Dahinden and Tania Zittoun, 'Religion in Meaning Making and Boundary Work: Theoretical Explorations', *Integrative Psychological and Behavioral Science* 47, no. 2 (June 2013): 194, https://doi.org/10.1007/s12124-013-9233-3.
[58] Nemanja Krstić, 'The Concept of Symbolic Boundaries – Characteristics and Scope', *Facta Universitatis* 21, no. 2 (17 August 2022): 62, https://doi.org/10.22190/FUPSPH2202061K.
[59] Krstić, 64.

repeatedly called the "Ashkenazi whore" by Merkada instead of her name. Murdoch, a Kurdish Jew who does business with Gabriel is often referred to as "the Kurd" and is not meant to be trusted. In fact, he scams Gabriel several times and is represented as a man without ethics. His scams impact the finances of the Ermosa family, which leads Ephraim to take revenge on him to defend his sister. Interestingly, as he punishes Murdoch, he tells him: "a Jew doesn't screw another Jew." In that sense, the common belonging to the Jewish group is mobilised from time to time as a political project yet does not reflect on the way they organise their social life. Non-Sephardi Jews can be business partners (like Murdoch or Mr Zacks) but are not meant to enter the family. When Rosa and Gabriel turn to a matchmaker to find Luna a husband in episode 1.14, they refuse a match with a Kurdish Jew, saying "We don't mix." On the other hand, when Luna talks to her father about her first boyfriend in episode 1.10, she says "he is one of us, Sephardi," making it clear that the us is not Jews as a whole but specifically Sephardim. When Gabriel asks a family friend how to get Luna a divorce, his friend laments that the Rabbinate (who has the decisive power) comprises only Ashkenazi rabbis.

The Brits have an ambiguous position in the show. Matilda Franco, Luna's friend, had a romantic relationship with a British officer (and was murdered because of it). In the second season, Luna becomes friendly with a British woman, Stephanie, the wife of an officer, who takes an interest in her sewing and designer skills. However, their relationship is rather asymmetrical, as Luna is somehow in a subordinate position. Similarly, Rosa tries to be friendly with the British soldiers because she needs them for her business. She cooks British and Turkish food for them in order to sustain the family. Most of them are represented as mean and frankly racist, with a few exceptions. But even the exceptions are not entirely positive. For example, Luna becomes a friend of Stephanie, an officer's wife who takes her under her wing. Her husband is openly insulting what he calls "the Levantines", even in front of Luna. While Stephanie grows to like Luna, she is patronising towards her, and she does not get rid of her

prejudices against the Jews living in Palestine. When a friend of David, a Sephardi woman, comes to the police station in a very agitated state, Stephanie instinctively claims that she should be shot, even though she is not a danger. Stephanie does not know that woman and therefore has not "humanised" her the way she did humanise Luna as she got to know her. So, she can be shot for being angry, something that Stephanie would probably not ask for if the woman was British. In *The Beauty Queen*, the villains are multiple. They are the Ottomans in the very first episode, then the British army, the Arabs in general, the Jewish nationalists, and to some extent, non-Sephardi Jews. However, if the main characters exceptionally bond with some Brits or Ashkenazim, the few that are presented in a positive light, there is no representation of positive Arab characters in Palestine. The only connection that Gabriel has is with a Lebanese Arab woman, Aisha, who he meets in Beirut while she's working as a sex worker, and he starts an affair with her. Aisha is his second affair, after Rochel. This is reminiscent of what Tasula tells Raşel in *The Club* about Ismet, the Muslim man she fell in love with: "He will sleep with Tasula but marry Pakize." By this, she means that while men agree to have passionate affairs with women from the out-group (Tasula is a Greek name), they will settle for marriage only with women from the in-group (Pakize is a more traditional Turkish name). Because this is directly connected with the question of reproduction, we will expand on this in the next chapter about gender.

4.2.2 Going across boundaries in *The Club*

In *The Club*, Matilda and her daughter interact indifferently with (non-Jewish) Turkish and Greek people. They are aware of their somehow precarious status as Jews in a nationalistic Turkey, but they do not avoid friendship with non-Jews whatsoever. Matilda draws the line when her daughter wants to marry a Turkish man. But the reason Matilda is against it (though cannot prevent it from happening) is not that she wants her daughter to marry a Jewish man for the "preservation of the lineage," but because she is afraid of the antisemitism her daughter

could experience and how that man could treat her. It reminds her of her own experience of loving a Turkish man who betrayed her two decades earlier. Matilda was ready to marry a non-Jew in the past, and in the present day forms a friendly bond with Selim Songür who is Turkish. She is even willing to tolerate Ismet. Eventually, Matilda accepts the relationship between Raşel and Ismet. She even herself ends up being romantically involved with Çelebi, who is Muslim (and a former villain). Despite the fear of power imbalance, both Matilda and Raşel are open to inter-marriages. However, Matilda gets devastated when Raşel converts to Islam. Matilda is a rather progressive person, especially when it comes to gender roles and interpersonal relationships, but she is also religious. It seems important for her to keep the Sephardi culture and tradition while forming genuine connections across communities. Therefore, the conversion of Raşel goes against her ideals. Besides, it questions the whole relationship Raşel has with Ismet. It all starts with Raşel pretending to be Aysel, and her converting and changing her name in order to convince him to come back to her appears as if she is once again trying to change her identity for a man. The conversion is purely a formality for Raşel and not a choice of conviction. Apart from thinking that he would like her more if she let go of her Jewish identity (which is not what he wanted her to do), her conversion is purely administrative. She does not leave the Jewish community, still attends a Jewish wedding, and continues to perform Jewish practices, like bringing stones to her father's grave or doing the *keriah* ritual when her mother passes away. This is an accurate illustration of one major reason for conversion is purely for materialistic, rather than spiritual reasons, may that be for professional advancement or a romantic relationship.

Boundary work influences how communities decide to socialise with in-group and out-group members. In somewhat segregated societies, business relations, as well as cordial relations, might be acceptable between different groups, but not close social relationships, may that be friendship or love and prevents inter-marriages. In The Club, however, characters often

go across these group boundaries. Matilda and Raşel actively question and refuse to be limited by their group categorisation. As an example, when in episode 2.07 Tasula explains to Rânâ that the next day she will not talk to Jews because it is the first Sunday of Easter, Rânâ says out loud "That is ridiculous. If it was one Jew who reported [Jesus], why do you stop talking to all Jews?" The bluntness of the child is used to ask a very simple question: why do we keep exclusionary traditions that are based on prejudice? Raşel is also visibly hurt by this tradition. She visits Tasula, who is not just a friend but basically part of the family, and asks her "Is my mum just a Jew you need to stop talking to?" This is a way pleading for people to be treated as individuals, and to be seen for who they are (in this case, a true friend) rather than according to their ethnic or religious group. In episode 1.04, Matilda has a discussion with one of her Muslim coworkers, Haci. She talks about a Sephardi song, and as she sees the confusion on Haci's face, she explains that Sephardim are "Jews who migrated to this land centuries ago. Like Me." He answers: "You mean like us", showing an attempt to create not only a bond with Matilda but a bond between their entangled history. When Matilda throws an engagement party for her daughter in episode 1.05, it is a very Jewish event, people dance to the song Hava Nagila, and the people present are mostly from the Sephardi community. But Selim comes to attend the party, as a clear symbol that not only he values Matilda, but also that he belongs in her close circles. The show is very wholesome in the way that not only Matilda and Raşel try to form meaningful connections with people from other ethnic groups, but also because it is reciprocal. As we mentioned in a previous part, one of the purposes of The Club is to be aspirational and therefore display how members of the majority group can be genuinely interested in other cultures, learn about them, and care about individuals who are deemed negative by the mainstream society. Haci, Selim, Çelebi, and even Ismet (all of them men) open up and embrace a culture that they have been told they should despise or at best, ignore. At the beginning of the second season, Ismet is seen in Greece, dancing Greek dance and perfectly fitting into a Greek

crowd. In episode 2.03, Selim quotes a Ladino saying, in Ladino: “Happiness will find the one who loves the family.” When Tasula is pregnant with Haci’s child in episode 2.09, she says that the child will be called either Niko or Meryam, indicating that both Greek and Turkish culture are considered in their family’s future. It is also reported that Raşel was the maid of honour at their wedding. In episode 2.10, Çelebi, in pain after Matilda’s sudden death, collects pebbles on the beach to put on her grave, following the Jewish tradition. All these examples illustrate that the work to go across ethnic boundaries is not only the burden of ethnic minorities but can also be performed by members of the ethnic majority.

4.3 CULTURAL REPRESENTATIONS

Besides representing the nation, the two shows also offer an insight into Sephardi culture, mostly through language, food, religion, and folklore.

4.3.1 Language

One interesting element of these shows is their use of Ladino. Just like Yiddish has seen a revival in films and television, there is a recent trend of trying to bring attention to Ladino. Ladino is a language spoken by the Ottoman Jews who had been expelled from Spain. It borrows from Spanish, Hebrew, and Turkish. In *The Club*, some scenes at the beginning of the first season are in Ladino, especially when Matilda talks with other members of her community. However, the main language, even when she speaks with her daughter Raşel, is Turkish. Throughout the show, one song in Ladino plays repeatedly, talking about a disappointing love story. In the second season, there is a reflection offered by the characters themselves on the use of Ladino. Raşel and Matilda make it a point of honour to teach Ladino to Rânâ, who is Raşel and Ismet’s daughter. There is a scene where an older woman is being mean to Raşel in Ladino, thinking that the young Rânâ would not understand them. However, she does. The woman then apologises, admitting that she thought they would not have taught her the language. Later in

that season, when Ismet tries to be more involved in the life of his daughter (he left five years before that), he is shown willing to learn enough Ladino to connect with the Jewish part of the family. He does not actually need Ladino, as everyone speaks perfectly Turkish, but we can imagine that it is either a way to connect more with them and to value their culture, or maybe also to avoid the fact that conversations might keep secrets from him.

The use of Ladino is more extensive in *The Beauty Queen*. Some characters like Merkada and Rosa regularly use Ladino words even when they speak Hebrew. It is visibly a generational thing, as Merkada speaks more often Ladino than Gabriel who himself speaks more often Ladino than his daughters. As for Rosa and her brother Ephraim, their use of Ladino probably also reflects their class background. Coming from a much poorer family, Rosa had to learn Turkish and English in order to work as a maid. She also speaks fluent Hebrew but maybe used it less until she married Gabriel. Gabriel and Merkada come from a wealthy merchant family, which is why Hebrew is their predominant business language. It is probably for the same reason that Gabriel speaks Arabic as well. Their proficiency in English, which they use especially to communicate with the British soldiers, is revealing of the fact that Gabriel, Rosa, and their daughters are from a different generation than Merkada. This is quite on point on the languages people would speak in a society so diverse as Jerusalem in the first half of the 20th century, depending on what are the concrete linguistic needs of each character, their generation, and their level of education. The code-switching is very realistic in *The Beauty Queen*. When characters have intense emotions, such as fear, excitement, or anger, they tend to switch to Ladino. Similarly, swear words and vulgar words are very often Ladino. For example, Merkada never uses the word "breast" in Hebrew, saying "*tetas*" instead, even in the middle of a Hebrew sentence. When Rosa and Merkada talk about Rochele, the Ashkenazi woman Gabriel is having an affair with, they usually refer to her as the "*puta*", the Ladino word for "whore". On a similar

note, Rachelika uses the Ladino expression "*hacer el amor*", as if she was too shy to say "to make love" in Hebrew.

4.3.2 Food

One minor aspect is seen in both shows, namely the significance of food. Food is an important feature in many Jewish rituals and is generally an important marker of belonging to a group, especially minorities[60]. The stories are mostly about female characters, and cooking was an important part of women's lives, especially during the period depicted in the shows. In The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem, Merkada bonds with her granddaughter Luna when trying to teach her how to cook. When she wants to flirt with men, Merkada also prepares food for them. Throughout the series, we see Rosa preparing food regularly, as it is one of her main daily tasks. The show illustrates the idea that food is a cultural marker of belonging when Rosa and Rachelika decide to sell food to British soldiers to make money. They attract the Brits by cooking kidney pie and blood pudding to make them feel "just like in England", but also make them discover *sütlaç*, a Turkish sweet rice pudding. Actually, the very fact that Rosa prepares blood pudding is controversial in the family, because cooking with blood is definitely not kosher. Repeatedly, Rosa and Merkada comment that British food "stinks", and the first time Rosa makes the blood pudding, Merkada is concerned about the fact that the neighbour could smell it. When Merkada socialises with Mr Zacks, Luna's boss who is Ashkenazi, she tries his food and expresses how she does not like it.

In *The Club*, food is also presented as a way to (re)connect with family. For example, when Raşel decides to forgive her mother for the murder of her lover (and Raşel's father), she spends hours making *lalanga* (a deep-fried flatbread) to bring to her mother.

[60] Joëlle Bahloul, 'Nourritures de l'altérité : Le Double Langage Des Juifs Algériens En France', *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 38, no. 2 (April 1983): 325–40, https://doi.org/10.3406/ahess.1983.410980; Elliott Horowitz, 'Remembering the Fish and Making a Tsimmes: Jewish Food, Jewish Identity, and Jewish Memory', *Jewish Quarterly Review* 104, no. 1 (December 2014): 57–79, https://doi.org/10.1353/jqr.2014.0010.

4.3.3 Religion and folklore

Both shows offer a glimpse into Sephardi religious practices but decided to focus on different elements. *The Club* aims to educate people, especially in Turkey, about the Jewish culture of the country. Therefore, we see relatively a lot of religious moments. Matilda is pious, we see her praying, she has a mezuzah, and she and Raşel go to the synagogue. We even see religious celebrations like Purim and a Jewish wedding. After Matilda dies at the end of the second season, Raşel performs the *keriah*, or "rending of garments," a Jewish ritual where the mourner rips his clothes on the chest, where the heart is, to express their grief.

The Beauty Queen assumes that the viewers are already educated about Judaism, which can explain why religious practices and celebrations do not have a prominent place in the show. Apart from a *Havdalah* celebration and weddings, there are not a lot of Jewish celebrations. However, in order to make the show Sephardi and not just Jewish, they incorporated a lot of folklore and mysticism in the story, mostly through the character of Merkada. Merkada regularly visits Gilda, who is a healer and somehow, a witch. She performs rituals in Ladino and creates and breaks curses. She can make predictions about the future, talk to the dead, and get rid of the evil eye by covering people with cow's intestines. While the show never delves into the fantasy genre, these moments for sure are at the limit between what is real and what is not. The place of folklore is more prominent than regular Jewish celebrations, and it strongly draws from typical Sephardi mysticism. The evil eye is mentioned regularly, just like the fact that everyone keeps wishing for Rosa to have a son, which is a recurrent type of blessing among Sephardim[61]. The character of Merkada and her rocky relationship with her daughter-in-law Rosa is also a common trope of Sephardi folklore[62].

[61] Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, *Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women: Sweetening the Spirits, Healing the Sick* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002).
[62] Isaac Jack Lévy and Rosemary Lévy Zumwalt, 'A Mother-in-Law Not Even of Clay Is Good: *Sfuegra Ni de Baro Es Buena* …', *Folklore* 123, no. 2 (August 2012): 127–51, https://doi.org/10.1080/0015587X.2012.682470.

5 FAMILY AND GENDER DYNAMICS

5.1 WOMEN

The Club and *The Beauty Queen* give prominence to strong female characters, especially through the characters of Matilda Aseo and Luna Ermosa. Matilda is an independent woman and works in a nightclub, which was seen as very unusual in the 1950s[63]. Luna tries to go against her family's pressure to gain freedom in her choice of husband, lifestyle, and profession. In this part, we will see some of the topics that the shows tackle regarding women, namely motherhood and reproduction, gender roles and the importance of transmission, and lastly violence against women.

The heavy part given to folklore and superstition in *The Beauty Queen* is connected to Sephardi culture, but also is a very gendered aspect of religion. "The women's religious sphere was at the heart of the Jewish families, in the homes[64]." In their book about rituals and medical lore of Sephardi women, Lévy and Lévy Zumwalt explained their ethnographic research among Sephardim in the former Ottoman Empire. They found that such practices belonged mostly to women, and therefore were heavily centred around women's health issues such as fertility, pregnancy, and motherhood. While most doctors were men, this gave a way for some women to gain a significant role in the community as healers, taking care mostly of other women. This increased the agency of women about their own health[65]. Both shows touch on unwanted pregnancies and abortion. When Raşel realises that she is pregnant after having a relationship with Ismet, she first goes with Tasula to a place to get an abortion, before changing her mind. In *The Beauty Queen*, after being raped during the Arab riots, Rosa is desperate to get rid of the

[63] Üstün, 'The Representation of Minority Women in Turkish Streaming Media'.
[64] Lévy and Zumwalt, *Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women*, 25.
[65] Lévy and Zumwalt, *Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women*.

baby. She goes to visit Gilda, who gives her a drink supposed to provoke an abortion. However, the process fails, and Rosa ends up giving birth to her third daughter. Abortions were actually performed by such healers, usually using a bitter herb called rue[66].

5.1.1 Transmission

Even if abortion appears as a possibility, they are not successfully carried out, and Merkada, Rosa, Matilda, and Raşel all have one thing in common: they are mothers and are raising children. The question of transmission is central, whether it is about the transmission of language, culture, or religion, but also of behaviours and traumas. Women, in addition to a "sacred" status as mothers and wives, had great control over domestic life, whether in terms of managing meals, religious celebrations, or the education of children[67]. Linda Ehrlich wrote about the transmission of Sephardi culture through documentaries. She explained that women had a key role in these documentaries and were the ones in charge of passing down the culture and preserving the group[68]. According to Lévy & Zumwalt, "A gendered view of religion is necessary, then, for recognizing the sacred spheres of male and female power and control[69]." In both *The Club* and *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*, the women are central to the story: they are the main characters, emphasis is put on the transmission through generations, and mother-daughter relationships are a significant part of the plot. From a nationalist perspective, women are indeed seen as the guardians of the culture and the reproduction. The issue of transmission is crucial in Judaism, as the religion is transmitted through the mother, hence the importance of being a Jewish mother.

[66] Lévy and Zumwalt, 97.
[67] Paula E Hyman, 'Two Models of Modernization: Jewish Women in the German and the Russian Empires', in *Jews and Gender: The Challenge to Hierarchy*, ed. Jonathan Frankel (Oxford University Press, NY, 2001), 42, https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780195140811.003.0002.
[68] Linda C. Ehrlich, 'A Change of Scene, a Change of Fortune: Cinematic Visions of the Sephardic Jew', *Shofar: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Jewish Studies* 15, no. 2 (1997): 1–20, https://doi.org/10.1353/sho.1997.0163.
[69] Lévy and Zumwalt, *Ritual Medical Lore of Sephardic Women*, 25.

The fact that Raşel is Jewish is never even discussed, although her father was Muslim. It is simply a fact: her mother is Jewish, Raşel was raised by the Jewish community, speaks Ladino, goes to the synagogue, and knows religious rites. The second season is very didactic about Rânâ's education. It is an explicit illustration that ethnic belonging is learned. For the five first years of her life, Rânâ was raised by her mother, her grandmother, Selim, and Tasula. She was taught Turkish, Ladino, and Greek. Her Jewishness is not questioned either because of the matrilineal filiation. When her father appears in her life, she is five years old. While he takes care of her and shares with her his philosophical views, he does not teach her anything religious. Fathers tend to be either absent or violent in *The Club*. Matilda seemed to have a good relationship with her father before he was sent to a labour camp. Raşel's father was killed before she was born and betrayed her mother. Rânâ's father was absent during her first five years, and even after his return, he took some time to find his place. Ismet himself does not have any positive father figure, as his own father is a domestic tyrant and a dubious businessman. Selim's father, whom we never see, terrorised him during his whole life. Orhan's father is dead. The antagonist of the second season, Fikret Kayali, is also regularly abused and beaten by his father. Most of the female characters in *The Club* are self-reliant.

But the transmission is not only about religion, language, and culture. Both shows address the challenges of inheriting traumas, leading characters to reproduce the same mistakes as their parents. In *The Club*, these intergenerational traumas are not seen as a fatality, but rather due to a lack of communication and a refusal to handle them properly. The main issue between Raşel and Matilda is the fact that Matilda murdered Raşel's father. When she finally apologises to Raşel about her past actions for the way they impacted her childhood, adult Rânâ's voice-over reflects on it by saying that "nobody should have to inherit scars," implying that it is the parent's responsibility to avoid transmitting these scars. In *The Beauty Queen*, intergenerational trauma is perceived more like a mystical curse that has to be broken by one of the descendants,

in this case by Luna when she decides to follow her own path and leave to work in fashion in London.

5.1.2 Reproduction

In the second season of *The Beauty Queen*, Merkada who has been a widow for two decades, considers marrying Mr. Zacks, Luna's boss. When Luna reminds her that he's Ashkenazi, she answers "I'm old enough to marry an Ashkenazi", meaning that if it doesn't impact reproduction then it is more acceptable.

The amount of violence against women tells us that violence is just part of being a woman, especially for "women from the past". The female characters have to comply with the gendered expectations of the time, meaning limited autonomy, social judgment, and male violence. Motherhood is one of the things that can be experienced as a form of violence. Both Matilda and Raşel had to give birth to their child in a complicated situation, without having a stable relationship. Even if they both initially were in love with the fathers of the child, being pregnant was never on purpose. Rosa Ermosa on the other hand, is expected to have children, and especially a boy. She and Gabriel do not have a loving, romantic relationship, as they were married by convenience. While Rosa does seem to like Gabriel, he will not reciprocate the affection for many years. They have intercourse with the only purpose of procreating, and Gabriel and Merkada openly show their deception at Rosa when she gives birth to girls, as she is held responsible. Rosa's and Gabriel's second child is a boy, who unfortunately passes away only a few days after the birth, which worsens the situation. As Rosa starts acting differently, it becomes evident to a modern audience that she is going through post-partum depression. In a time when this was not even a topic discussed and when the main role for women was to be mothers, she and her relatives cannot understand what she is going through. It is now known to be an issue affecting a lot of women, allowing viewers to relate to her. Raşel also struggles with motherhood after giving birth to Rânâ. In her case, her behaviour is more reminiscent of a form

of bipolarity, affecting the way she takes care of her daughter. The fact that mothers can struggle with mental health issues while raising young children is a sensitive topic, hence such representation on television especially in works of fiction about Jewish women is rather outstanding. The question of reproduction is also closely linked to the question of group boundaries. From a very nationalist perspective, women should only reproduce with men from their own group. The women who do not comply with that rule in The Beauty Queen are punished. When Matilda Franco is dating a British officer, one member of the Irgun tells her "Jewish women are for Jewish men." In the second season, Ephraim is asked to execute a Jewish woman who had a relationship with an Arab man.

5.1.3 Violence

The question of reproduction within a nationalist framework can lead to very violent and difficult situations for women. Explicit domestic and sexual violence is another common feature of both shows. This is rather usual in works of fiction centred on women's lives. Unfortunately, it is treated in ambiguous ways. In *The Beauty Queen*, two characters are raped, namely Rosa and Luna. They are also involved in an unhappy relationship, though the domestic violence is more straightforward in Luna's case. Rosa is raped by strangers, two Arab men, during the 1929 riots, and Luna undergoes marital rape, as her husband David grows increasingly violent and controlling towards her. Interestingly, the writers decided to include two rape storylines with different implications. If a show wants to tackle the issue of domestic violence, it also often includes sexual assault. Marital rape was made illegal only in 1980 in Israel and the 1990s in the United Kingdom, meaning that during the period in which the show is set, it is legal. However, the case of Rosa portrays more unusual circumstances, linked with the tensions between the different groups living in Mandate Palestine at the time. It especially touches upon the question of out-group perpetrators. Not only was she violated, but she was violated by non-Jews. And to add to the dramatic event, Rosa gets pregnant and gives birth to

a girl resulting from the rape. As mentioned earlier, Rosa first tries to get rid of the foetus, struggling to cope with the assault. But once the child is born, the struggle disappears. On the other hand, Gabriel has a hard time accepting the child, not because of what Rosa went through but because he is not the biological father, and even worse for him, the child is part Arab. This part of the story was not present in the book the show is based on, leading us to think that it could have been added purely for shock value and add burden on the character of Rosa. But it also says something about the fear of "mixed blood" in nationalistic societies, reminding us that women are supposed to reproduce within the in-group in order to expand it, and not outside of it. If we take the paradigm developed in *The Club*, namely that family is not just about the blood, we could escape that way of envisioning family and by extension, the nation. However, The Beauty Queen is very shy in its attempt to make this point. Indeed, the child born from the rape, Becky, loses her storyline as she grows up. Gabriel ends up accepting her and loving her, but this is never mentioned again. There is no investigation on how it affected her as a child and teenager, we do not even know if she is aware of her backstory. It suddenly seems inconsequential, as if that part of the plot was forgotten by the writers. Even worse, the show makes a parallel with the son, named Shlomo, that Gabriel had as a result of his affair with Rochel. He gets to know him when he is already a young adult in the second season. Rosa loses her temper when she discovers the existence of Shlomo, and Gabriel tries to calm her down by telling her that this is the same situation as her giving birth to Becky, which shows a poor understanding of the difference between adultery and sexual assault.

The story of Luna and David is a more classical case of domestic violence. They love and choose each other, but David starts being violent and controlling after their wedding. He tries to prevent Luna from working and seeing her friends and almost kills her during a rage outburst. On one hand, the show gives a lukewarm explanation for his change of character: he suffers from post-traumatic stress after being stationed in Greece during the war. He is

depressed and struggles to see Luna having a happy and successful career while he cannot find a job, questioning his role as a man and provider. This is in a way problematic, as it avoids addressing the systemic aspect of domestic violence. On the other hand, the show unequivocally takes Luna's side, illustrating the challenge of getting a divorce in a society where not only divorce is frowned upon, but also where only the husband can give the get to his wife, meaning that David has to be convinced to agree to divorce. But the explicit violence of David towards Luna serves other purposes. First, it is used to make another ethnic boundary. Indeed, when Merkada tries to reason with David about his behaviour in episode 2.04, she tells him that "In this house, we don't hit wives, we're not Arabs." She tries to appeal to his Jewish identity, claiming that as such he should be well-mannered, as opposed to the Arabs, who according to her, are culturally brutal. Then, the other purpose is to downplay the abuse in the relationship between Gabriel and Rosa. Gabriel himself tells Rosa that, if he was not the best husband, at least he never hit her. He tells that to convince her to let Luna get a divorce, yet by doing so, the show is telling its viewers that as long as physical violence is not involved, then there is nothing to complain about. Rosa has been neglected, controlled, and verbally abused for years by Gabriel and Merkada, and this is presented as insignificant.

The Club tries in the first season to take an explicit stance against gendered violence. When Ismet slaps Raşel, Matilda warns her that "a slap is never just a slap." He slapped her for hiding her Jewish identity. Not only is it an instance of gendered domestic violence, but it is also connected to Raşel's status as a member of a minority group. The power imbalance is even bigger: Ismet is a man, from the majority group, and much older than Raşel (he is probably in his early 30s, she is 17 years old.) Later on, instead of really apologising for the slap, he blames her for her lie, not ever trying to understand the reasons that would push her to conceal her identity. Yet, despite Matilda advocating for her safety, Raşel does not give up on Ismet. Selling

the idea that loving women can "fix" violent men is dangerous[70]. However, the second season of *The Club* does exactly that, which is a recurring trope in Turkish television (Yüksel). One part of the plot is about Raşel who tries everything to convince Ismet to resume their relationship, even if he was abusive to her in the past. The other storyline is about Matilda and Çelebi being romantically involved, despite him mistreating her in the first season. He stole her passport, manipulated her, was openly xenophobic, trafficked underaged girls and sexually abused Tasula. In episode 1.08, we learn that all this was because he was in pain: he used to be in love with Matilda seventeen years ago, and she did not recognise him when she was liberated from prison. Once she sees him for who he really is, she suddenly "understands" him, and he stops being a villain. During the five-year ellipse between season 1 and season 2, he redeems himself, but we do not witness it. Viewers are simply expected to accept this redemption and not question the impact it could have on Tasula for example. Thus, despite the attempts to offer alternative female role models, The Club fails at properly addressing the question of gender-based violence.

5.2 FAMILY

5.2.1 Chosen family in *The Club*

Both shows give a lot of importance to family yet define it differently. In the second episode of *The Club*, Matilda, who just met her daughter, tells her that family is chosen. This will reflect on the whole show. After being released from prison, Matilda almost left Turkey for Israel, without even seeing the daughter she gave up on 17 years later. However, she ends up choosing to stay and to get to know her. Raşel is reluctant at first, hurt by the fact that her mother abandoned her and left her in an orphanage. Matilda knows that she can't impose herself

[70] Nadia Chapman, 'Women Aren't The Men Mechanic', *Fearless She Wrote* (blog), 31 October 2019, https://medium.com/fearless-she-wrote/women-arent-the-men-mechanic-efdd1b5302d8.

on her daughter and that Raşel has to choose her as well. Their relationship is very rocky, but indeed Raşel keeps coming back to Matilda, eventually accepting to be a family. But family is not just a bloodline for Matilda. Through solidarity, trust, and friendship, she builds her chosen family in the Istanbul Club where she works, with non-Jewish coworkers. At the end of the first season, her long-lost brother reappears. Seventeen years ago, he was sent to a work camp because of the Wealth Tax, and Matilda had always believed him to be dead. However, he survived and moved to the USA. When he writes to her and asks her to come to the USA, Matilda is thrilled and hesitates but ends up staying in Istanbul, with the family she chose and cherishes. In episode 1.05, Matilda offers Selim a self-made gift. Moved by the gesture, he explains "Since I don't see my family, I forgot about such traditions." Matilda operates as a replacement family figure. In episode 1.07, Çelebi blackmails Selim, asking him to change his stage costume if he does not want Matilda's secret past to be revealed. Even though the costume is very important to him, he decides to protect Matilda, expressing that he did it "for the family."

5.2.2 Given family in The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem

In *The Beauty Queen*, the blood family prevails. Even those who can marry into the family are carefully assessed and meticulously watched. The characters constantly have to fight against their family members in order to do what they want. When Luna decides to marry her neighbour David Franco, her family (and his) disagree. Even if he is Sephardi, there is a bad history between the two families, hence the disapproval. After insisting over and over again, everybody ends up conceding and they celebrate their wedding. What could be seen as a victory for Luna and her agency, the marriage turns into a violent nightmare for her, with David controlling, abusing, raping, and beating her, almost killing her at some point. This can be interpreted as a kind of "I told you so" moral of the story, meaning that going against her family's wish proved to be detrimental to her. Interestingly, when Luna and her father conclude that Luna should get a divorce, it is met with resistance from her mother and grandmother. They

did not want Luna to marry David, yet they did not want her to divorce from him either, as divorce is seen as an utter disgrace. If David is part of the family now, he should not be expelled from it. Similarly, a bad family member like Ephraim Siton will always be protected by the family, even when he commits terrible acts that they thoroughly disapprove of. The refusal of Merkada and Rosa to agree to divorce can be explained by the fact that, as women, they were more likely to be taught that divorce is shameful and should not be considered, while it is more acceptable for a man like Gabriel to contemplate it. At the end of the day, Gabriel is technically capable of granting someone a divorce, but Merkada and Rosa are not.

I would argue that in both shows, the family is an allegory of the nation. Thus, the family unit functions in a similar manner to how the nation is envisioned: diverse, unconventional, and with loose boundaries in *The Club* – closed, based on blood, and with strict boundaries *in The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*.

6 RECEPTION

Before concluding this thesis, I want to offer a brief overview of how the shows were received in Israel, Turkey, and by Jews internationally.

The Club was quite a success on Netflix. It reached the global Top 10 of non-English series during the second week of November 2021, just after it came out, with over 7 million hours of viewing. In Turkey, the first season made it to the Top 10 for nineteen weeks in total, and the second season for eight weeks. However, outside of Turkey, only in Saudi Arabia was the first season in the Top 10 for one week.

The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem never reached the global top ranks. The first season was popular enough to appear at least once in the weekly Top 10 of several countries, namely France, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, South Africa, Spain, and Australia. In Israel, the first season made the Top 10 for nine weeks, and the second for ten weeks. It was also nominated for the 2023 Television Academy Awards yet did not win in any of the categories.

The arrival of *The Club* was more eventful than the one of *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*. Indeed, the mere fact that a Turkish TV show was telling the story of the Istanbul Jewish community was a little revolution. It led a few scholars to examine the role of such a work of fiction and how it impacts Turkish television, but also the public discussions it provoked. Melis Öneren-Özbek wrote a paper on how Turkish people, Jews, and non-Jews, engaged in conversations on social media about the Wealth Tax and the 1955 riots[71]. But if some people complained about the way *The Club* is critical towards these two events, the overall reception was positive. A few articles and think pieces were published by Turkish media to praise it, finding satisfaction in a "fresh take" on Turkish history, far from the mainstream stories people

[71] Melis Öneren-Özbek, 'Antisemitism in Contemporary Türkiye: Discourses on Turkish Jews on Twitter', *Discourse & Society* 35, no. 1 (January 2024): 116–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265231195461.

are used to watching. More importantly, the show was also considered a success by the Jewish community in Turkey. For example, the blog *Avlaremoz*[72], run by young Turkish Jews, as well as the Jewish newspaper *Şalom*[73], wrote many positive articles about the show. Even if the main actresses and actors were not Jewish, the Jewish community was involved every step of the way during the creation process. The realistic depiction of Jewish life and the (correct) use of Ladino was appreciated, and the (positive) visibility it gave to Turkish Jews was deemed outstanding. As explained by the team of *Avlaremoz* and Rânâ Denizer, the writer of The Club, the Jews of Turkey in the last years went from "*Kayades to Avlaremoz*[74]", meaning from "Be Quiet to Let's Talk". The idea is that, after trying to be discreet, if not invisible, for a long time, Turkish Jews now want to be heard and able to discuss their participation in Turkish society. One of their objectives is to educate people about the history of the Turkish minority, as a reminder that Turkey is a diverse country. It seems like *The Club* is helping to achieve this purpose.

The reception of *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem* is more complex to interpret. It has not been the subject of scholarly work or deep analysis, maybe because it does not have such a strong and clear purpose as *The Club*. For sure it was a commercial success, just like the book it was based on, but probably more for its entertainment value and because major actors like Michael Aloni and Hila Sadaa had prominent roles. It is not the first Israeli series to cross the borders, but it is remarkable because it is the first one to do so while being exclusively about Sephardim. Because of the lack of scholarly attention, I had to rely on the articles written about the show. Details like the costumes, the acting, and the use of Ladino were praised, but feelings about the storylines and the use of history are mixed. In an interview, the actress Swell Ariel Or (playing Luna), who is of Russian, Iraqi, and Yemeni background, explained how important

[72] 'Biz Kimiz? -Avlaremoz', -*Avlaremoz* (blog), accessed 6 June 2024, https://www.avlaremoz.com/biz-kimiz/.
[73] 'Şalom Gazetesi | Haftalık Siyasi ve Kültürel Gazete', Şalom Gazetesi, accessed 6 June 2024, https://www.salom.com.tr/.
[74] 'Biz Kimiz?'; *Interview with Rânâ Denizer, Co-Writer of Netflix Show "Kulüp" ('The Club') — Melike Yücel-Koç*.

it was to represent the diversity of Jews, but also that the show made her realise how the Ashkenazi-Sephardi relationship is better now in Israel[75]. This is reminiscent of one of the roles of historical fiction, which is to make the viewers appreciate the progress of the present times. She also highlights that *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem* is about the establishment of the State of Israel, specifically about the Jews who were already present on the territory before 1948 and fought for it. This is the conclusion I made from watching the show, namely that it was about including Sephardim within the Israeli collective memory of the early steps of nation-building. However, it is interesting that some online Jewish publications, like *The Tablet* or *Jewish News Syndicate*, accused *The Beauty Queen* of not being nationalist enough, for example by portraying Arabs in a light deemed too positive and by being critical of the Irgun[76], which is at the opposite of my interpretation of the show. This discrepancy happens because viewers have different political stances and expectations, but one article from Haaretz gave an interesting opinion that could be a further explanation for these discording interpretations. According to this article, *The Beauty Queen* lacks "didactic moralism", meaning that very often the actions and words of the characters are delivered as they are, without any judgment[77]. This gives a lot of space for individual interpretations. It is still unclear if there will be a third season, since the book had a further generation, focusing on Luna's daughter until the 1970's. It would be interesting to see the show's developments in post-1948 Jerusalem.

After the release of these two series, one thing is sure: we still have so many stories to tell about non-Ashkenazi Jews.

[75] Elizabeth Karpen, '"Beauty Queen of Jerusalem" Actress Swell Ariel Or Shares about Sephardic Representation and Playing Luna Ermosa', Unpacked, 7 September 2023, https://jewishunpacked.com/beauty-queen-of-jerusalem-actress-swell-ariel-or-shares-about-sephardic-representation-and-playing-luna-Ermosa/.

[76] 'The Problem with "The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem," Israel's New TV Hit', Tablet Magazine, 5 August 2021, https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/arts-letters/articles/the-beauty-queen-jerusalem; Yana Grinshpun, '"The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem" and the Wolf of Odessa', JNS.org, 6 November 2022, https://www.jns.org/the-beauty-queen-of-jerusalem-and-the-wolf-of-odessa/.

[77] Gafi Amir, '"4, הארץ', איזה כיף. אמין ולא דידקטי": מלכת היופי של ירושלים June 2021, sec. טלוויזיה, https://www.haaretz.co.il/gallery/television/2021-06-04/ty-article/.premium/0000017f-e64f-dea7-adff-f7fffeba0000.

7 CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored the interplay between historical fiction and nationalism through the analysis of two series, *The Club* and *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem*. By examining their different goals and the ways they integrate historical narratives into national discourses, we can gain a deeper understanding of how historical fiction can serve both educational and integrative functions within national contexts.

The Club aims to educate viewers about the Jewish community in Turkey, challenging the dominant national narrative by presenting a nuanced and often underrepresented segment of Turkish history. This series is grounded in reality with some flexibility to create an aspirational narrative. It highlights the importance of inclusivity and diversity, advocating for a more comprehensive understanding of the nation's past and looser inter-ethnic boundaries. It depicts the family as a dynamic practice and not exclusively relying on blood, emphasising the active role of individuals in shaping their heritage and identities. The show suggests that heritage is not a fatalistic burden but something that people have power over. Through its rich and inclusive storytelling, *The Club* not only challenges the traditional national canon but also inspires a vision of Turkey where diversity is celebrated and embraced.

The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem does not have a strong educational component but also seeks to integrate Sephardi Jews into the Israeli national narrative by focusing on their experiences and contributions to the pre-State nation, and even sometimes overestimating this contribution in a process I name "*Sephardisation*." The chronology of the show follows real events but operates on a selective memory mode, reinforcing the strict group boundaries defining not only the Israeli nation but also subcultural Jewish groups like the Sephardim. The series portrays the family as the supreme unit, acting like a clan, giving it a central role in preserving cultural identity amidst broader national conflicts. It also depicts heritage as a

double-edged sword, where familial legacy can be both a source of strength and a curse that is hard to break.

The Club and *The Beauty Queen of Jerusalem* both give a prominent place to women in their storylines. This is due to the genre of the shows but is also connected to the role of women in Judaism, namely as the main transmitter, as well as in nationalism in general. However, the ambiguous representation of gender-based violence counterbalances their positive attempt to create positive female role models. Another common feature of both shows is how family is treated as an allegory of the nation, with an absolute and strict definition in *The Beauty Queen*, and a flexible and negotiable definition in *The Club*.

We could go further by doing qualitative and quantitative research on how individuals felt after watching these shows and how they interpreted it, in Turkey, Israel, or the broader Jewish diaspora, and especially the Sephardi diaspora. It could also be compared to other contemporary Jewish series like *The King of Warsaw*, *Rough Diamonds*, or *The Zweiflers*.

It is important to pay attention to works of popular culture that offer new stories and feature underrepresented groups. In the case of the representation of Jews, we should make the effort to depict a more diverse and comprehensive reality, which is that there is not just one Jewish community, history, and culture, but a multitude of them. This would allow the audience to get a more nuanced and complex understanding of what "Jewish" can mean, rather than an essentialised and homogeneous perception.

Both productions illustrate the significant role that historical fiction can play in shaping and reshaping national narratives. They can present alternative perspectives and highlight marginalised communities but use this to either reinforce a national narrative or on the contrary promote a more inclusive and multifaceted understanding of national identity.

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