# QUEERING THE GENDER CODES IN TÜRKIYE: ZEKI MÜREN AS A TRANSLATIONAL PRESENCE


## ABSTRACT

This article examines the performative reconfiguration of binary gender codes through the artistic persona of Zeki Müren, framed within the context of cultural translation. Zeki Müren (1931–1996), a renowned Turkish singer, composer, and cultural icon, was celebrated for his androgynous image, distinctive voice, and transformative contributions to both Turkish classical and contemporary music. His self-presentation and performances are seen as acts that challenged traditional portrayals of masculinity and femininity, disrupting dominant gender norms in Türkiye since the 1950s. Drawing on Sarah Maitland's theory of cultural translation and Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity, the study adopts a multimodal thematic approach to analyze Müren's fluid identity and aesthetic expression. Special attention is given to his linguistic and lyrical choices, use of pseudonyms, performative gestures, and especially the stage costumes he either designed or meticulously curated. These elements are explored as acts of cultural translation that negotiate between traditional gender codes and emergent queer possibilities, with the costumes functioning as visual texts that enrich the analysis of gender through their symbolic and theatrical dimensions. Ultimately, the article argues that Müren subverted heteronormative structures and expanded the imaginative space for queer identity within Türkiye's socio-cultural landscape, a context marked by both deeply conservative gender norms and a distinctive receptivity to his singular public persona.




**Keywords:** Queer translation. Binary gender codes. Performativity. Cultural translation. Zeki Müren.


## RESUMO

Este artigo investiga a reconfiguração performativa dos códigos binários de gênero a partir da construção estética e da *persona* artística de Zeki Müren (1931–1996), situada no campo da tradução cultural. Zeki Müren, cantor, compositor e ícone cultural da Turquia, tornou-se uma figura consagrada por sua imagem andrógina, voz singular e atuação disruptiva, tanto na música clássica turca, quanto na música



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contemporânea. Sua autoperformance e presença pública são compreendidas como atos que tensionaram e deslocaram as representações tradicionais de masculinidade e feminilidade, desestabilizando, desde os anos 1950, os regimes normativos de gênero no contexto turco. Ancorado na teoria da tradução cultural de Sarah Maitland e na performatividade de gênero em Judith Butler, o estudo adota uma abordagem multimodal e temática para analisar a fluidez identitária e a expressão estética de Müren. O artigo dedica especial atenção às escolhas linguísticas e poéticas do artista, ao uso de pseudônimos, aos gestos performativos e, sobretudo, aos figurinos que ele próprio desenhava ou escolhia com extremo rigor estético. Esses elementos são lidos como atos de tradução cultural que negociam, de forma criativa e crítica, entre códigos de gênero tradicionais e possibilidades *queer* emergentes, sendo os figurinos tratados como textos visuais que expandem a leitura do gênero por meio de suas camadas simbólicas, estéticas e teatrais. Defende-se, por fim, que Müren não apenas subverteu estruturas heteronormativas, como também ampliou o imaginário possível para a construção de identidades dissidentes no contexto sociocultural da Turquia, um espaço marcado, simultaneamente, por regimes de controle e normatividade de gênero e pela recepção singular que sua *persona* pública foi capaz de mobilizar.

**Palavras-chave:** Tradução *queer*. Códigos binários de gênero. Performatividade. Tradução cultural. Zeki Müren.

> *We don't have a body that we come later to reflect upon. We make ourselves a body, we earn our own body—we pay a high (political and affective) price for it.* —Paul B. Preciado



## Introduction

Zeki Müren, as a leading performer, composer, and songwriter of Classical Turkish Music, is an iconic figure in Turkish Art Music. His artistic career, spanning from the 1950s to the late 1980s, left a profound societal impact through his emotional voice, distinctive style, and striking appearance. Known for his dignified and courteous stage presence, Müren was awarded the title "Sun of Art" for his vocal strength, musical achievements, and theatrical grandeur, and was regarded as Turkey's first civilian "pasha" (TRT Radyo, 2014). The analysis approaches Müren's artistic persona as cultural translation and gender performativity, examining his body, voice, costume, and stage presence as a multimodal act that produces meaning. This study builds its theoretical framework on Sarah Maitland's theory of cultural translation (2017), Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity (2004), and Marc Démont's concept of the queering mode of translation (2018). The central research question asks how Müren's artistic persona, shaped through language, costume, gesture, and performance as a multilayered composition, can be interpreted as cultural translation that reflects and transforms dominant gender ideologies. Maitland's notion of cultural translation as a gesture of interpretation and desire (2017, pp. 53–54), Butler's view of gender as constituted through repetition and improvisation (2004, p. 52), and Démont's queering

mode of translation (2018, p. 168) together offer a lens to explore ambiguity, norm resistance, and alternative meanings in Müren's art. In order to fully explore Zeki Müren's role as a translational presence that queers dominant gender codes in Türkiye, this article undertakes a multimodal analysis of his artistic production. The dataset consists of selected songs penned and performed by Müren, costumes he designed and named, public performances, film appearances where he played himself, media reports, and archival visual materials. All of these elements are regarded as cultural texts involved in negotiating gender norms and shaping alternative subjectivities. Through this dataset, the study applies a multimodal thematic method that integrates textual, visual, and performative dimensions to identify how these components work collectively to destabilize heteronormative binaries and create new imaginative spaces for queer identity. This integrative approach allows for a nuanced reading of Müren's art as an ongoing act of cultural translation and gender resignification. Rather than conveying a stable identity, Müren's artistic acts enact cultural translation that questions and redefines gender norms. His gestures, vocal tone, and costume create an identity that both aligns with and disrupts social expectations, while translation itself emerges as a socially situated act shaped by convention and improvisation (Maitland, 2017, p. 4). Texts are viewed not merely as linguistic structures but as semiotic constructs with multilayered meanings through visual and auditory elements (Machin and Mayr, 2012, p. 15) and the body functions as a form of writing that encodes lived experiences, cultural traces, and personal narratives, conveying meaning through physical presence (Preciado, 2018, p. 25). So shaped by discourse and repeated actions, the body simultaneously produces and interprets cultural, social, and political meanings. It can be said that Müren's expression opens interpretive space beyond semantic content, resisting normative closure (Démont, 2018, p. 168). His fusion of body, fashion, and persona blurs normative boundaries and redefines aesthetic conventions. In this framework, cultural translation emerges as a multimodal queering process that reconfigures perception and challenges fixed meanings, reflecting the transformative potential of embodied expression (Démont, 2018, p. 168; Maitland, 2017, pp. 53–54). In this study, Müren's artistic expression is approached as a cultural translation, and a multimodal analytical method is used to examine how he enacts this translation through visual aesthetics, physical presence, and self-presentation in the construction of identity and cultural narratives.



## Zeki Müren's Early Life and Artistic Formation

Zeki Müren, born on December 6, 1931, in Bursa, Türkiye, was the only child of Kaya and Hayriye Müren, who had emigrated from Skopje (Indigo Journal, 2018). He began singing at the age of three, inspired by his grandfather who was a muezzin (Gazete Duvar, 2020). He was always different. After circumcision, instead of burning henna according to the traditions in Türkiye, he applied nail polish on his nails and

continued to wear his sparkling, ornate circumcision outfit for an entire month (Atabilen, 2014). He always wished to be noticed and sing on the stage. Moving to Istanbul for high school in 1946, he started to compose his first songs during these years. At age 20, while studying at university, he auditioned for Turkish Radio, impressing with his vast repertoire and securing a position that made his voice iconic in Turkish homes so that people wanted to buy "radios which played Zeki Müren" (Özer, 2014). He became such an esteemed figure that even national days started with ceremonies accompanied by his waltz. Over his career, he recorded more than 600 songs and starred in 18 films, often portraying a musician navigating love and fame in these movies (Giaimo, 2016). Müren became an icon not only with his artistic skills but also with his flamboyant fashion choices, defying 1950s (and even today's) gender norms with colorful outfits, feathered capes, and platform heels, many of which he designed himself.

## Queering the Stage: Costume, Appearance, and Performance

With meticulously styled hair, often in voluminous waves or sleekly combed back that echoed the elegance of classic crooners, and with his androgynous beauty and heavy makeup such as arched eyebrows, thick eyeliner, and shimmering eyeshadow, Zeki Müren's physical appearance, fashion, and stage presence were strikingly unique. His fashion sense was a spectacle in itself. Müren's wardrobe exuded flamboyance, reminiscent of Liberace's extravagant capes and Elvis Presley's rhinestone-studded jumpsuits. He adorned himself with sequins, silk robes, and opulent accessories, elevating Turkish stage fashion to a new level of theatricality (Meriç, n.d.). Müren's stage presence was strictly controlled, yet warm and personal. Unlike past Turkish musicians who maintained a formal distance, he cultivated a deep connection with his audience, addressing them with poetic sincerity. His graceful movements, poised gestures, and expressive hand motions recalled the elegance of a female star. In blending classic charm with boundary-pushing aesthetics, Müren was not only redefining what it meant to be a star but also heteronormative certitudes in Türkiye. Müren's deliberate repetition of stylized gestures and vocal expressions emerges as a profoundly subversive and transformative strategy when considered through Butler's theory of performativity and Maitland's understanding of cultural translation. This approach transcends mere imitation, enacting identity dynamically in ways that question and redefine social norms. In line with Butler's view that gender is constituted through repetition and improvisation, Müren's embodied and aesthetic acts destabilize gender roles as a fixed construct. Maitland's notion of cultural translation frames these acts not simply as the transmission of meaning, but as a process of reshaping and negotiating meaning through engagement with the other. Through each gesture and vocal inflection, Müren not only critiques existing power structures but also invites audiences to reconsider the fluidity and multiplicity of identity. These performances

offer a powerful commentary on the performative nature of gender and social roles, disrupting conventional expectations and holding the potential to transform both individual and collective understandings of self.

## Linguistic Strategies and Public Persona: "You created me, my dear audience!"

Zeki Müren, often called the "Sun of Art" ["Sanat Güneşi"], had a deliberate way of speaking. He was known for his politeness. He adopted a highly refined, neutral tone, blending the İstanbul dialect, which suggests a higher class status and being urban (Boyacioğlu, 2016, p. 29), with a politeness that goes beyond heteronormative boundaries. In the permanence of Zeki Müren and even in his impact on society, his way of using the Turkish language plays a decisive role before his music. Possessing impeccable grammar and diction, Müren spoke a Turkish enriched with embellishments of his own. His prosody was flawless as well (Tulgar, 2022). He often used expressions such as "Efendim" ["Sir/Madam"] and "Sizlere layık olabiliyor muyum?" ["Am I worthy of you?"], which elevated the sense of decorum. Additionally, he often used terms like "Favor" ["Teveccüh"], "Grateful" ["Minnetar"], "Affection" ["Muhabbet"], "Sincere" ["Samimi"], "Heart" ["Gönül"], "Gratitude" ["Şükran"], "Applause" ["Alkış"], "Modestly" ["Naçizane"], "Thankful" ["Müteşekkir"], and "Humble" ["Naçiz"] (Uslu, 2018). He also used expressions such as "Allow me to present, Sir..." ["Arz edeyim efendim..."], "Thanks be to the Almighty God". ["Yüce Tanrıya şükürler olsun."], "You are always so elegant and always so beautiful..." ["Her zaman çok zarif ve her zaman çok güzelsiniz..."], "It is an honor to me..." ["Şeref duyarım..."], "May they accept it..." ["Kabul buyursunlar..."], "The deepest love..." ["En engin sevgi..."], "You show your favor as always..." ["Teveccüh gösteriyorsunuz her zamanki gibi..."], and "This has been made possible thanks to our great people..." ["Yüce halkımızın sayesinde oldu bu..."] (ibid.). While this may appear as extreme humility, it also acted as a linguistic buffer against potential attacks on his non-normative identity. It can be said that this self-effacing linguistic style allowed him to be respected and appreciated a lot and to exist outside strict gender norms while his appearance was the elephant in the room. Through his carefully curated speech and self-representations embracing ambiguity and gender-neutral expressions, Müren managed to be "fluid" in Turkish culture, allowing him to navigate a conservative society while still challenging its rigid binaries. His exaggerated politeness allowed him to subtly distance himself from traditional gender expectations while still existing within mainstream Turkish culture. The phrase "You created me, my dear audience" is a famous statement of Zeki Müren as well. In doing so, he positions the audience as a co-creator of his presence. This can be interpreted as both a genuine expression of humility and again a strategic maneuver to avoid being marginalized as an outsider.



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**Figure 1**. Public reception of Zeki Müren in İzmir


The arrival of Zeki Müren in İzmir, as depicted in Figure 1 (see Figure 2) (İzmir Büyükşehir Belediyesi), a city that with its fair shaped the artistic life of the period, serves as an example of how his artistic persona operated in the public sphere through a queering mode of translation. The placard Müren carries reads "I have come with my respect to my dear Aegean" ["Canım Egeme Saygımla Geldim"]. This expression conveys a sincere sense of belonging and attachment to both local and national identity. However, this belonging is articulated not through a conventional form of masculinity or national representation but through a poetic, naive, and emotional tone. Visually, Müren's stance is also significantly removed from heteronormative frameworks, highlighted by the fact that he is carried above the crowd. In this way, the symbolic meanings conveyed by both the expression and the performance are not limited to a heteronormative reading. Instead, they create space for the audience to reinterpret these discourses of belonging and affection within alternative understandings of gender and identity. Such linguistic and bodily expressions by Müren, in line with Démont's concept of a queering mode of translation, prevent the fixation of meaning. By keeping alive the multiple layers of meaning and associative ambiguities of the text on stage, they create new possibilities for meaning that challenge the norms.



## Songs, Lyrics, and Ambiguous Desire

He also aimed to blur the boundaries between his created persona and his authentic self, thus turning identity into a performative practice that continuously reconstituted it not as a fixed and essential reality, but as a fluid and dynamic process. Müren's performances were not simply representations of predetermined roles; rather,

they functioned as spaces where identity was staged, negotiated, and reimagined. Through his embodied practices, Müren adopted a strategy that queered both himself and his stage performance, destabilizing normative binaries such as the authentic versus the artificial, the masculine versus the feminine, and the normative versus the marginal.

Müren's existence possessed at once a visible and invisible quality (Hawkins, 2018, p. 105). He deliberately wanted the characters he played in films to be named Zeki, further erasing the distance between his personal identity and its imagined version. Moreover, these films were titled after the songs he had written, and their narratives aligned with his own star narrative (Boyacıoğlu, 2016, p. 29). His artistic production, particularly in examples like the song *"İşte Benim Zeki Müren"* [*Here I Am: Zeki Müren*], exemplifies this strategy in a tangible and powerful way. In this song, the narrator is not a fictional character; it is Zeki Müren himself, creating a space where the boundary between performer and performance dissolves. This space operates as a queering mode of translation, resisting the reduction of meaning to a singular, fixed interpretation. Instead, it reveals a multiple and fluid identity that invites alternative readings on his existence. The illustration of this play with the uniformity and stability of identity can be found in the lyrics of this song*:*

> (...)
> Neither on Earth, nor on the Moon, ["Ne dünyada ne de ayda"]
> My place is far away, I live with prayers. ["Benim yerim çok uzakta, dualarla yaşıyorum"]
> Expressing emotions through songs, being stricken with griefs, ["Şarkılara duygu seren çilelere göğüs geren"]
> The one who enters suffering hearts, here I am, Zeki Müren". ["Dertli gönüllere giren işte benim Zeki Müren"] (Zeki MÜREN, 2015).



Müren also blurred the lines between performer and audience by directly interacting with listeners and popularizing the T-shaped stage, which allowed him to physically come closer to the audience (Bull, 2018). As a result, people from across the political spectrum saw him as more than just an artist, viewing him as a friend or a family member. This deep affection led to his being called *Batmayan Güneş* [*The Sun That Never Sets*]. In the years that followed, Müren was awarded the title of *State Artist*, being recognized as an exemplary artist-citizen aligned with the official ideal.

Many of Müren's song lyrics avoid specifying the gender of the beloved. For example, in "Şimdi Uzaklardasın" ["Now You Are Far Away"], the lyrics are not gender revealing as not in many other songs, allowing listeners to project their own optics onto the lyrics:

> Now you are far away ["Şimdi uzaklardasın"]
> My heart is filled with sorrow ["Gönül hicranla doldu"]

> While I used to say I could never part ["Hiç ayrılamam derken"]
> Meeting again became a dream ["Kavuşmak hayal oldu"]
> The flowers in the garden of love ["Sevda bahçelerinin"]
> Have all wilted ["Çiçekleri hep soldu"]
> While I used to say I could never part ["Hiç ayrılamam derken"]
> Meeting again became a dream. ["Kavuşmak hayal
> oldu"]" (Zeki Müren Yaş Günü Konseri, 2016).

These kinds of ambiguities indirectly enable more inclusive interpretations of love and desire which are the expressions of instantaneous queer moments. In this sense, Müren's songs become not just expressions of personal emotion but also collective, shared moments of queer experience that are not confined by heteronormative or binary frameworks. The lack of specificity opens up the possibility for multiple interpretations, allowing his music to resonate with a wider audience, particularly those whose experiences of love and desire might not align with conventional representations. Through this, Müren's work subtly challenges rigid societal norms and offers a form of liberation. This performative existence, in which ambiguity and visual disruption operate as deliberate strategies to resist semantic closure and enable plural readings, functions as a performative invitation to rethink norms. It transforms the stage into a site where meaning remains open, fluid, and contested, allowing alternative possibilities of identity, gender, and belonging to emerge.

Müren frequently sang about love, particularly "gizli aşk" ["hidden love"], as seen in "Gizli Aşk Bu" ["This Is a Secret Love"]:



> This is a secret love, I can't share my troubles with anyone, ["Gizli aşk bu söyleyemem derdimi hiç kimseye"]
>
> Goodbye to pleasure, goodbye to joy, I've bid farewell to everyone. ["Zevke veda, neşeye de veda artık herşeye".]
>
> Desires turned to illusions, one by one, the roses of my spring have faded, ["Arzular bir bir hayal oldu, baharımın gülleri soldu,"]
>
> My heart is filled with sorrow, longing, and pain, uninvited. ["Gönlüm hicran, hasret, gamla doldu".]
>
> I loved, but look, I am blind to all who could be, ["Sevdim amma görmüyor bak gözlerim hiç kimseyi",]
>
> Secret love was secret sorrow, I gave up all that was dear to me. ["Gizli aşk bir gizli dertmiş, feda ettim herşeyi"] (Zeki MÜREN - Gizli Aşk Bu, 2018).

It is observed that all 32 songs, the lyrics of which he personally wrote, including "Şimdi Uzaklardasın Gönül Hicranla Doldu" ["Now you are far away, my heart is filled with sorrow"], "Bir Yaz Yağmuru Gibi Geçiverdi Aşkımız" ["Our love passed by like a summer rain"], and "Devâ Bulmayacak Mı Kalbimdeki Bu Yara" ["Will this wound in my heart never heal?"], are, without exception, about love and longing for the beloved.

However, there is no indication that the beloved is a woman or a man (Zeki Müren Besteleri, 2015).

Complementing his conceivably queer linguistic presence, Müren's clothing became increasingly revolutionary, enhancing the queer aspect of his persona on stage once his place in the limelight was secured. During his performances, he would wear costumes that defied traditional gender roles. He designed his costumes (Arşiv Odası, 2014) and it can be said that he handled the risk of this attitude by showing these outfits as art pieces, naming them like "Şampanyanın Rüyası" ["The Dream of the Champagne"], "Mimozaların Tebessümü" ["The Smile of the Mimosas"], "Susamış İstiridye" ["Thirsty Oyster"], "Paris Geceleri" ["Parisian Nights"], "Çapkın Kızılcıklar" ["The Flirtatious Cranberries"], "Sırdaş Geceler" ["Confidential Nights"] and "Kalbimi Ellerinde Tut" ["Hold My Heart in Your Hands"]. It is recorded that the lightest of his clothes weighed 10 kilos and the heaviest 20 kilos (Çintay, 2014). The most sensational ones were the costumes he wore in 1970, the "Uğur Duvağı" ["Lucky Veil"] (see Figure 2) and in 1974, the "Uzaydan Gelen Prens" ["Prince from Outer Space"] (see Figure 3) (Eren, 2014). The poetic and evocative names of Müren's costumes played a significant role in queering his stage presence. These names evoked softness, intimacy, secrecy, and excess, positioning his attire not merely as clothing but as art objects and narrative devices that drew the audience into a world of ambiguity and imagination. Rather than serving as neutral labels, they became integral to his performance, contributing to the creation of a space where desire, identity, and belonging could be reimagined beyond heteronormative frameworks.



**Figure 2.** Zeki Müren's costume "Lucky Veil"

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**Figure 3.** Zeki Müren's costume "Prince from Outer Space"

The interplay between lyrical ambiguity and visual performance demonstrates that Müren's artistry surpassed traditional modes of expression. His songs evoke a sense of queer affect through emotional openness and the intentional avoidance of gendered language in his songs, while his stage persona reinforces this queerness through bold visual elements that question normative expectations. These choices of performance, particularly regarding gender and identity, can be more clearly understood within the conceptual framework of Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Butler's ideas help us see Müren's self-expression as a continuous social act shaped by repetition, constraint, and interaction with others. According to Butler (2004), gender should be understood not as a fixed state but as an ongoing practice (p. 10). It is not an automatic action; rather, it involves improvisation within socially defined boundaries. Butler emphasizes that gender is "not for that reason automatic or mechanical. On the contrary, it is a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint. Moreover, one does not 'do' one's gender alone. One is always 'doing' with or for another, even if the other is only imaginary" (p. 1). This idea of continuous repetition within constraint is highly relevant to Müren's carefully constructed performance style, where gestures, vocal tone, and costume form a consistent yet subversive expression of identity.



Similarly, translation may be understood as a performative act that is deeply embedded in social contexts. Rather than a straightforward transfer of meaning, it is shaped by cultural norms and occurs within structural limitations. Like gender, translation involves improvisation, negotiation, and engagement with an audience, whether real or imagined. In parallel, Müren's translational act in his interpretation of gender demonstrates that identity and meaning are not fixed but are continually formed through interaction with cultural frameworks and others.

Müren made conscious decisions in his performances, yet he also acted with caution and strategic awareness. As he told journalists, "Let me tell you a secret. Backstage, the pants to wear under the miniskirt were ready. If I saw the slightest reaction, I would have worn them, but the public loved them" (Yapar, 2015). These words reveal his sensitivity to audience reactions and the deliberate nature of his

challenge to gender norms, positioning his performances within a negotiational zone where cultural expectations, audience responses, and personal expression intersect. In this sense, his layered meanings and diverse forms of expression can be viewed in relation to what Maitland (2017) describes as cultural translation, not only as the interpretation of meaning but as its performative reconstruction.

## Negotiating Identity and State Recognition

Müren's career, spanning from the early 1950s to the late 1980s, unfolded during a time of significant change in Türkiye. During this period, the country underwent military interventions that reinforced a nationalist ideology and often tightened societal norms regarding morality and public behavior. Müren's prominence on national television and radio created a cultural paradox: he embraced an androgynous, flamboyant aesthetic in a society where gender norms were strongly enforced. During Müren's peak years, although homosexuality was not criminalized, it was widely stigmatized, so he naturally became a target of the press. His attendance at the presidential reception, where he wore makeup and a pearl brooch on his bow tie, was criticized in one of the most prominent newspapers of the time with the headline "Let's Teach Zeki Müren Some Manners." He dismissed these criticisms, stating, "The newspaper has already contradicted itself with the photos it published. I first shook the President's hand at the invitation, and later, we shared moments of friendship. He accepted me as I am. The fact that he dedicated forty-five minutes of the one-and-a-half-hour reception to me and Ms. Ajda (Müren attended these events with one of Turkey's most famous singers, Ajda Pekkan) is, in fact, a response to this matter" (Kökkaya, 2015). This public acceptance, despite ongoing criticism, illustrates what Judith Butler describes as resistance through repetition. Rather than engaging in direct confrontation, Müren's steady and visible expression of gender nonconformity gradually fostered social tolerance through familiarity and cultural presence.



While masculinity in Türkiye was closely tied to heteronormative values, Müren received conditional tolerance (Hawkins, 2018, p. 103). His gender nonconformity was often tolerated due to his immense artistic talent and perceived patriotism. Müren's linguistic politeness and deliberate avoidance of gendered referents can be understood as strategic translations that mediated between visibility and acceptability. Rather than directly confronting dominant norms, his carefully coded language allowed room for queer expression while remaining legible to a broad audience. This form of "alla turca" nonconformity was even respected by official agents. For instance, when police raided the gay clubs Müren frequented, they would reportedly say, "We apologize, pasha, we disturbed you," before promptly leaving. In these moments, Müren served as a symbolic mediator between marginalized communities and state authority. His presence offered a performative shield, enabling temporary pockets of queer sociability within a constrained sociopolitical context.

"Pasha" ("Paşa"), a historically masculine title associated with military prestige, became one of Müren's most iconic pseudonyms. An anecdote about this title demonstrates his ironic engagement with masculinist authority. As recounted by Çakırlar and cited in Hawkins (2016, p. 104), Kenan Evren, leader of the 1980 military coup, once asked Müren why people called him "pasha." Müren reportedly replied, "This nation was so angry about what you did during the military coup, but they couldn't openly express their anger. Rather than calling you and your colleagues faggots, they called me 'pasha'." Regardless of its authenticity, the anecdote illustrates how Müren's public persona reappropriated slurs and subverted hegemonic discourses through irony and public wit. By transforming what might otherwise serve as tools of marginalization into sources of empowerment and humor, he disrupted the dominant narratives that sought to fix his identity within rigid and stigmatizing categories.

Butler's emphasis on the resignification of the basic categories of ontology, of being human, of being gendered, and of being recognizably sexual through submitting oneself to a process of cultural translation aligns closely with Maitland's understanding of cultural translation as a transformative force.

> "Cultural translation is also a process of yielding our most fundamental categories, that is, seeing how and why they break up, require resignification when they encounter the limits of an available episteme: what is unknown or not yet known. It is crucial to recognize that the notion of the human will only be built over time in and by the process of cultural translation, where it is not a translation between two languages that stay enclosed, distinct, unified. Rather, translation will compel each language to change in order to apprehend the other, and this apprehension, at the limit of what is familiar, parochial, and already known, will be the occasion for both an ethical and social transformation", Butler (2004, p 38) explains.



Zeki Müren passed away on September 24, 1996, due to a heart attack while appearing on a live television program at the TRT studio in İzmir where he was being honored for his contributions to Turkish music. At the time of his death, Zeki Müren was wearing a gold-embroidered caftan, named "Son Gece" ["The Last Night"], a signature style of his that reflected his flamboyant and elegant stage presence. The following day, newspapers reported that he had not taken his medication that day.

Müren was targeted for never explicitly addressing his sexual identity. He never openly stated that he was gay. In response to direct questions about his sexuality, he stated, "Having both a masculine and a feminine soul is not a perversion but a form of spiritual wealth" (Effy, 2024). He was also criticized for maintaining close ties with political authorities, adopting a nationalist discourse, and not deviating from the state paradigm (Çağlayangöl, 2018). Over time, his symbolic presence became a source of inspiration. A popular slogan among younger generations declared, "I asked Zeki Müren, and he said, 'Resist!'" His mastery of poetic lyricism and theatrical self-presentation

enabled him to model identities that defied binary gender logics. His public persona demonstrated that identity is not fixed but constituted through performative acts. By repeating gestures, styles, and language that disrupted heteronormative expectations, Müren transformed his body into a site of resignification.

His lasting influence on Turkish popular culture and queer representation remains significant. Müren's ability to fluidly shift between traditionally gendered aesthetics offers a powerful model of queer performativity. Through cultural translation and aesthetic negotiation, he created space for fluid identities to emerge in a context marked by rigid binaries. His legacy remains vital for contemporary queer thought and performance in Türkiye, serving as a blueprint for future generations to imagine and embody queerness beyond the constraints of normativity.

## Conclusion

As a public icon and cultural "translator," Zeki Müren reinterpreted gender norms and queer identity through his stage costumes, makeup, linguistic choices, and performances, creating a fluid understanding of gender identity in Türkiye. His meticulously curated image, linguistic fluidity, and boundary-pushing performances were not only acts of self-expression but also reflections of the cultural landscape that both embraced and constrained him. By embodying an androgynous, theatrical aesthetic while maintaining a deep respect for tradition, he carved out a unique space where queerness could exist within the framework of Turkish society. Müren's existence itself was an act of defiance that challenged rigid binaries and reimagined identity as an evolving, performative process. His ability to engage with his audience while preserving a carefully balanced ambiguity allowed him to be both adored and accepted, ensuring his presence endured as an icon of fluidity and resilience. Even in his absence, his influence continues to shape contemporary understandings of queerness and inspires new generations to redefine identity on their own terms.



These artistic interventions can be meaningfully interpreted through the frameworks of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, Sarah Maitland's theory of cultural translation, and Marc Démont's concept of queer translation. Butler reminds us that identity is not something we are but something we do, and Müren's repeated stylizations of body, voice, and gesture illustrate how gender is performatively constituted. Démont's perspective helps interpret Müren's ambiguous self-presentation as a form of queer survivability that negotiates visibility within restrictive norms. In the context of Maitland's understanding of cultural translation, Müren's performances can be seen as artistic expressions that rework gender norms and introduce alternative ways of constructing identity in a heteronormative society. Müren's work engages in cultural translation by reshaping traditional gender roles and offering new symbolic vocabularies for self-expression, while also negotiating between the self and the other

through bodily gestures, costumes, and vocal registers that reflect and reconfigure prevailing norms.

This dual capacity to reflect and challenge dominant narratives is central to Müren's cultural power. His performances opened discursive spaces where fixed meanings around gender and identity could be reimagined and queered, functioning as acts of cultural translation that invited transformation through aesthetic and symbolic engagement. The inclusion of visual materials, such as costume images, further emphasizes the role of visual semiotics in multimodal cultural translation, as these elements work alongside language and gesture to construct queer subjectivity. Müren's artistry embodies the transformative dimension of cultural translation, not simply as a form of individual self-expression but as a cultural act that encouraged audiences to rethink identity and gender beyond inherited binaries. His legacy continues to serve as a valuable model for interdisciplinary inquiry into how queerness is negotiated, performed, and received in diverse socio-cultural contexts, highlighting that identity is earned through active resistance and redefinition rather than conformity to fixed categories.

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