

## Analyzing the Turkish Popular Literature Translation in the First Parts of the Twentieth Century: The Case of Güven Publishing House<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This article explores how the sociopolitical climate of early twentieth-century Türkiye shaped the translation and circulation of popular fiction, focusing particularly on the role of Güven Publishing House, an influential yet understudied actor active between 1923 and 1960. Rather than treating translation trends of the period in abstract terms, the study takes Güven's publishing activity as a concrete entry point for understanding how popular genres—detective fiction, historical adventure narratives, and other forms of mass-market storytelling—traveled from English into Turkish and reached a rapidly expanding readership. Building on Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar's *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey*, the article situates Güven within the broader literary and cultural environment of the early Republic, a time when translation was not merely a linguistic practice but part of a larger cultural negotiation. By examining selected works from the publisher's catalog, the study highlights the strategies used in their translation—abridgment, adaptation, domestication, and, at times, pseudotranslation—and considers why these choices may have appealed to contemporary readers. The discussion ultimately aims to shed light on how Güven Publishing House became a pioneering player in popular fiction translation and how its output intersected with Türkiye's shifting social, economic, and political landscape.

**Keywords:** Turkish popular literature translation, early twentieth century, translation studies, Turkish–English literary translation, publishing history

### 1. Introduction

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The first half of the twentieth century was a period in which the Turkish literary system underwent profound and sometimes abrupt transformations. The newly founded Republic was not only reforming its political and social institutions but also reshaping cultural life, including reading habits and the very notion of literature. During these years, translated works—especially examples of popular fiction such as detective novels, adventure stories, and serialized historical romances—played an important role in introducing new narrative forms to emerging readerships. These texts circulated widely among urban readers and gradually became part of the everyday literary experience of the period (Woodstein, 2022, pp. 2–10).

Within this evolving cultural landscape, Güven Publishing House stands out as a particularly active and influential institution. Although its name appears in several studies on translation history in Türkiye, the publisher itself has rarely been examined in depth. Much of the existing scholarship, including the foundational research of Tahir Gürçağlar (2008), Üyepazarcı (1997), and Sümbül (2021), mentions Güven only in passing while focusing on broader discussions of popular fiction or literary circulation (Tahir Gürçağlar, 2008; Üyepazarcı, 1997; Sümbül, 2021). As a result, we still know relatively little about the publisher’s specific translation choices, its catalog structure, or its cultural impact.

This article attempts to fill that gap. By focusing on Güven Publishing House as a case study, it aims to offer a clearer understanding of how translated popular fiction participated in shaping the literary environment of early Republican Türkiye. Three goals guide this study. First, the article seeks to situate the emergence of Güven within the cultural and literary dynamics of the time. Second, it aims to identify and classify the kinds of popular works that the publisher translated and to explore how these translations interacted with the ideological, social, and economic contexts of the 1920s–1960s. Third, it examines selected examples from the publisher’s catalog to shed light on the translation strategies employed, including abridgment, domestication, adaptation, and even pseudotranslation.

Methodologically, the study adopts a descriptive, historically informed approach. Even-Zohar’s polysystem theory provides a conceptual foundation, particularly in understanding how translated literature can occupy central positions in periods of cultural change (Even-Zohar, 1990). This framework is complemented by scholarship on book history and popular fiction (Bloom, 2008; Gelder, 2004; Glover & McCracken, 2012; McCracken, 1998). The primary dataset consists of translated works published by Güven between 1923 and 1960, including well-known series such as Sherlock Holmes and Pardaillan, alongside other popular narratives that resonated with contemporary readers. Secondary materials—catalogs, bibliographical studies, and earlier academic research—help contextualize the publisher’s activity and reconstruct its editorial practices.

It is important to emphasize the scope and limitations of this study. The analysis focuses specifically on Güven Publishing House and does not attempt to produce a comprehensive account of all popular fiction translations in Türkiye during the early Republican decades. The period between 1923 and 1960 is chosen deliberately, as these years saw rapid shifts in educational policy, literacy levels, and the structure of the publishing market, all of which directly shaped translation activities. By narrowing the focus, the article aims to offer a more precise and nuanced picture of how one publisher navigated this complex cultural environment.

Examined from this perspective, Güven Publishing House becomes more than a commercial enterprise: it emerges as a cultural mediator that helped introduce global genres to Turkish readers and participated in shaping literary tastes during a pivotal historical moment. The sections that follow provide a historical overview of the early Republican context, trace the development of Güven Publishing House, and analyze its translated works and translation strategies in detail.

## **2. The Politics of Education and Translation in Türkiye, 1923-1960**

The early decades of the Turkish Republic unfolded against a backdrop of ambitious political, educational, and cultural reforms. These changes reshaped nearly every aspect of social life, and translation practices were no exception. As Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar's *The Politics and Poetics of Translation in Turkey* convincingly demonstrates, it is difficult to separate translation from the broader nation-building project of the period (Tahir Gürçağlar, 2008). Translation was not simply a literary activity; it functioned as a cultural tool that served both ideological aims and practical needs.

One of the most influential initiatives of the era was the establishment of the Translation Bureau in 1940 under the leadership of Minister of Education Hasan Âli Yücel. In its formative years, the bureau oversaw the translation of more than a thousand works, with a particular emphasis on the Western canon—philosophy, humanism, and foundational literary texts. These translations profoundly shaped the modern Turkish literary system, not only by reconfiguring the intellectual horizons of the reading public but also by indirectly encouraging private publishers to engage in areas the bureau did not prioritize. Popular fiction, in particular, fell outside the bureau's remit and subsequently became a space where commercial publishers like Güven carved out their own cultural roles.

Educational reforms further illuminate the era's ambitions. As scholars such as Somel (as cited in Karaömerlioğlu, 1998) and Nohl (as cited in Karaömerlioğlu, 1998) have shown, the Republic sought to rebuild the entire school system on a centralized and secular foundation. New schools were established primarily in urban centers such as Ankara,

İstanbul, and İzmir, while rural regions experienced different social and economic realities. Initiatives such as the Village Institutes (Köy Enstitüleri) and People's Houses (Halkevleri) emerged as attempts to address this imbalance. Although these institutions had relatively short lifespans—especially the Village Institutes, which closed during the tense political climate of the early Cold War—they played an important role in shaping intellectual life and promoting literacy during the 1940s.

Taken together, these developments—state-led translation policies, educational reforms, and evolving socioeconomic conditions—created a fertile environment for new cultural actors. It was within this dynamic and often transitional literary marketplace that Güven Publishing House began to operate. The rise of private publishers during this period signals a diversification of readership and an increasing demand for genres outside the classical canon, particularly popular fiction such as detective stories, adventure narratives, and serialized novels. While these genres were seldom granted the same cultural prestige as canonical works, they contributed meaningfully to the formation of popular reading practices and helped introduce new narrative forms to a broad and rapidly expanding audience.

### **3. Historical Background of Güven Publishing House**

Understanding the establishment and development of Güven Publishing House requires situating it within the broader cultural and political atmosphere of the early Republic—a period marked by sweeping reforms in education, literacy, and cultural production. The founding ideology of the Republic placed significant emphasis on modernization, and these ambitions inevitably reshaped the publishing sector. As literacy rates began to rise and public education expanded, an increasingly diverse readership emerged, eager for new and accessible forms of literature. Popular fiction, with its fast-paced narratives and recognizable conventions, quickly found a place within this environment.

Güven Publishing House became one of the notable actors in this transitional literary scene. Although the archival record concerning its founders and internal workings remains limited, surviving catalogues and bibliographic studies indicate that the publisher was especially active from the 1920s through the 1960s. Across these decades, Güven issued a substantial number of translated works, particularly in genres that appealed to a wide audience: detective fiction, adventure novels, historical romances, and various forms of serialized storytelling. These genres held particular appeal for readers who were newly engaging with print culture but who were not necessarily drawn to the classical or canonical works that dominated state-sponsored translation efforts.

The publisher's strategies reveal a keen awareness of the reading market. Many of its books were released as part of long-running series or multi-volume narratives, encouraging

readers to follow ongoing stories and characters. This approach mirrored not only global trends in popular literature but also the economic realities of the Turkish book market, where short, affordable installments were more feasible for both publishers and readers. Serialization offered familiarity, continuity, and an accessible entry point into the world of translated fiction.

Another noteworthy aspect of Güven's catalog is its diversity. The publisher did not confine itself strictly to direct translations; it also produced adaptations, simplified versions, and occasionally works that were reshaped to align better with local expectations. In some cases, titles were altered, extended descriptions were compressed, or storylines were streamlined—all practices that reflected both market pressures and cultural preferences. During this period, translation was often treated as a flexible and pragmatic form of rewriting rather than a strictly faithful linguistic transfer. Güven's catalog embodies this fluidity.

Although popular fiction formed the core of its output, Güven occasionally ventured into other areas. Publications aimed at young readers, moral instruction texts, or simplified narratives for broader audiences appeared alongside the more commercial adventure and detective titles. While smaller in number, these works signal the publisher's responsiveness to the educational priorities of the early Republic and its interest in cultivating a readership that extended beyond adult consumers of popular fiction.

Despite the limited archival documentation available today, the surviving evidence paints a picture of a publisher that played a significant cultural role in shaping mid-twentieth-century reading practices. Güven Publishing House not only introduced Turkish readers to a wide array of global popular narratives but also contributed to the expansion of a popular literary culture at a moment when the country was redefining its social and cultural identity. In this sense, Güven serves as a compelling example of how commercial publishers helped mediate and domesticate global literary forms for local audiences.

#### **4. Translated Works and Translation Strategies of Güven Publishing House**

The translated works published by Güven Publishing House provide valuable insight into both the publisher's editorial orientation and the evolving tastes of Turkish readers during the early to mid-twentieth century. A closer look at the catalog shows a pronounced emphasis on detective fiction, adventure narratives, and melodramatic plots—genres that were already enjoying international popularity and that readily appealed to a readership becoming increasingly familiar with mass-market literature. These works were often issued in series formats, complete with recurring heroes, instantly recognizable tropes, and cliffhanger

endings. Such publishing strategies made the books not only entertaining but also habit-forming, encouraging readers to follow characters across multiple volumes.

Within this body of translated literature, the publisher's preferences and priorities become evident. British and American detective novels, in particular, seemed to resonate strongly with Turkish audiences. Authors such as Edgar Wallace or Arthur Conan Doyle—though sometimes filtered through abridged editions or adapted renditions—occupied a central place in the publisher's lists. Similarly, adventure stories that blended exotic settings with fast-moving plots were widely circulated, inviting readers into imaginative worlds that balanced escapism with familiarity (Carter, 2018).

However, the catalog does more than indicate what kinds of stories were made available; it also reveals how translation itself was conceptualized and practiced. In many cases, the versions published by Güven were not strict, word-for-word translations. Instead, translators frequently engaged in rewriting practices shaped by commercial expectations, cultural norms, and the practical realities of the book market. These strategies took several forms:

**Abridgment and Condensation:** Many of the works were shortened to fit the affordable booklet format that dominated popular publishing at the time. Long descriptive passages were trimmed, and secondary plotlines were sometimes omitted. The goal was to produce fast, affordable reading material rather than comprehensive literary reproductions.

**Domestication:** Some translations show clear signs of adjustment to local sensibilities. References that might seem distant or irrelevant to Turkish readers were simplified or contextualized, making the stories appear more familiar. In several cases, cultural or linguistic elements were softened or adapted to avoid alienating the audience.

**Pseudotranslation and Rewriting:** Although not always explicitly acknowledged, the period saw the emergence of texts that blended translation with creative rewriting. A work might be presented as a translation—even carrying a foreign author's name—while containing substantial modifications or original passages. This approach, common at the time, reveals the porous boundaries between translation and original writing in the popular literature market.

**Title Changes and Repackaging:** The publisher often altered the titles of works in order to emphasize intrigue or drama, aiming to capture readers' attention in a crowded marketplace. Repackaging was an essential marketing tool and often involved reframing a story to highlight what would most appeal to local tastes.

These strategies show that translation in this context was not merely a linguistic act but part of a broader cultural and commercial enterprise. Translators and editors were not invisible intermediaries; they were active shapers of the texts, making decisions that balanced fidelity with readability, international trends with local expectations, and narrative coherence with economic constraints.

Given the limited archival documentation surrounding individual translators, it is difficult to reconstruct the precise decision-making processes behind each publication. Nevertheless, the textual traces present in surviving editions make clear that Güven's translated works were the outcome of highly pragmatic editorial interventions. They reflect a dynamic interplay between global literary flows and the specific cultural environment of early twentieth-century Türkiye.

## **5. Discussion**

The examination of Güven Publishing House's catalog and translation practices reveals several interconnected patterns that help illuminate not only the publisher's editorial stance but also the broader dynamics of popular literature consumption in early twentieth-century Türkiye. Rather than viewing these works as isolated publications, it becomes more meaningful to interpret them as part of an evolving literary ecosystem shaped by social change, new reading habits, and the growing commercial possibilities of translated fiction.

One of the most striking findings is the publisher's consistent investment in genres that had already proven their international appeal. Detective stories, crime narratives, and fast-paced adventure novels dominated the catalog, suggesting that Güven had a sharp understanding of market demand. These works were typically short, accessible, and plot-driven—qualities that suited readers who were just beginning to participate in a developing print culture. The publisher's decision to prioritize such genres indicates an attempt to bridge global reading trends with local expectations.

Another important observation concerns the varied degrees of intervention visible in the translations. The textual evidence points to a publishing environment in which rigid notions of linguistic fidelity were not the primary concern. Instead, what mattered was the overall readability and marketability of the final text. As a result, a single translated work might contain compressions, altered character names, or restructured dialogue, while still maintaining the general storyline of the original. This type of editorial mediation reflects not a lack of professionalism but rather a pragmatic understanding of what popular fiction required during the period: clarity, pace, and affordability.

In several cases, the publisher appears to have favored translations that could be serialized or extended through sequels, whether directly imported from foreign authors or

shaped through localized rewriting. This suggests that sustaining reader engagement was a critical strategy. Serialization created anticipation and allowed the publisher to cultivate a loyal readership. It also aligned with contemporary economic realities—shorter, cheaper installments were more feasible for many readers and ensured continuous demand.

Furthermore, the interplay between translated texts and their sociocultural environment becomes evident when we examine the adjustments made in the narratives. For example, certain moral tensions or culturally distant references were softened, sometimes subtly and sometimes more decisively. These alterations reflect both an editorial sensitivity to the domestic audience and the broader tendency, common at the time, to treat translation as an adaptable tool for shaping public taste. Through such interventions, translated texts were effectively re-anchored within the social and cultural landscape of Türkiye.

Another noteworthy finding is the publisher's role in expanding the scope of popular reading materials. Although detective and adventure fiction remained central, Güven also experimented with educational and moralistic texts, revealing an awareness of the shifting expectations of the new Republic. These publications, while fewer in number, demonstrate that the publisher was not strictly confined to commercial imperatives; it was also operating within an environment that valued literacy, national development, and accessible reading materials (Tekalp & Tarakçioğlu, 2016).

Taken together, these findings illustrate how Güven Publishing House contributed to the growth of a popular fiction market that was both global in its sources and local in its adaptations. The publisher mediated foreign literary forms and shaped their reception by blending translation, rewriting, and market-driven editorial strategies. In doing so, Güven played a modest but meaningful part in constructing a reading culture that accompanied Türkiye's broader social transformation during the first half of the twentieth century.

## **6. Conclusion**

This study set out to examine how Güven Publishing House contributed to the translation and circulation of popular fiction in Türkiye during the first decades of the twentieth century, a period marked by profound social and cultural transformation. By looking closely at the publisher's catalog, the genres it prioritized, and the translation strategies it employed, it becomes clear that Güven operated at the intersection of global literary trends and the domestic demands of a rapidly changing readership.

The analysis suggests that Güven's significance lay not merely in the number of books it produced but in how it approached translation as a flexible and pragmatic practice. Rather than adhering strictly to the original texts, the publisher often favored adaptations, abridgments, and restructurings that aligned with the expectations of the local audience.



These interventions, far from diminishing the value of the translations, reveal how popular literature functioned as a space where commercial imperatives, cultural preferences, and narrative accessibility intersected.

The study also highlights the publisher's role in shaping reading habits through its emphasis on series, serialized plots, and familiar narrative structures. These strategies encouraged sustained engagement and helped lay the foundation for a more robust market for mass literature. In this sense, Güven Publishing House contributed not only to the availability of translated popular fiction but also to the development of a broader reading culture in Türkiye.

At the same time, the findings underline the need for further research. The scarcity of archival material, particularly concerning translators, editorial decision-making, and distribution networks, presents challenges but also opens avenues for deeper inquiry. Future studies might examine surviving paratexts, copyright records, or comparative textual analyses to gain a clearer picture of individual translation practices and the publisher's broader impact.

Overall, Güven Publishing House stands as an illustrative example of how translation, publishing, and cultural transformation converged in the early Republic. Its activities shed light not only on the circulation of specific genres but also on the ways in which popular literature was adapted, reshaped, and domesticated for new readers navigating the shifting landscape of twentieth-century Türkiye. As also shown in the sources discussed in this study, by situating Güven within this larger context, this study contributes to our understanding of the cultural mechanisms that guided the emergence of modern Turkish reading publics.

## **Disclosures**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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