

# The Paramilitary Hero on Turkish Television



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A Case Study  
on *Valley of the Wolves*

By

Berfin Emre Çetin

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CUP:	Committee of Union and Progress
EU:	European Union
GAP:	Project of South Eastern Anatolia
GUP:	Great Unity Party
HI:	Hearths of Intellectuals
ISMMMO:	Chamber of Public Accountants and Financial Consultants in Istanbul
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO:	Non-Governmental Organisation
NMP:	Nationalist Movement Party
OECD:	Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development
SOT:	Special Operation Teams
SOU:	Society of Ottoman Unity
PKK:	Kurdish Worker's Party
PSO:	Public Security Organisation
RPNP:	Republican Peasants Nation Party
RTUK:	Radio Television Supreme Council
TRT:	Turkish Radio and Television Corporation
USSR:	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VoW:	Valley of the Wolves

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## INTRODUCTION

The camera zooms towards four men on the red-carpeted stairs of a casino, in the centre of which sits a large green roulette table. Three of the men, suited in black, stand still while a white-shirted man kneels before them with his hands tied behind his back. The camera zooms in on the faces of the four men. The men in black look ahead in hatred and anger. The kneeling man looks defiant, yet slightly anxious. Then the screen goes blank. A black and white flash-back scene begins: one of the men who was shown standing and a woman hug and start dancing in joy while musicians play the soundtrack from *The Godfather* for them in the casino. The only people in the room are the dancing couple, their bodyguards and the musicians. Seconds later, the camera returns us to real time and the dancing man talks to the captive: “Here is the casino that you wanted to have Tombalaci<sup>1</sup>”. The camera pans to the two men on the right and then to Tombalaci, who is seen behind the stair rails and seems more anxious.

The man who spoke kicks Tombalaci down the stairs. The men slowly go down the stairs one-by-one. They stand in front of Tombalaci, who lies suffering in pain, while we see them in a low-angle shot from the view of Tombalaci. The same man speaks again: “Someone lied to you telling you that it is easy to kill Cakir. You’ve hurt me too much. But you can’t take what I didn’t give to you [You can’t kill me]”. He kicks Tombalaci again and says to the man on his left: “Memati, tie him”. In the following shots we see Tombalaci tied by his arms and legs to the pillars of the casino, suspended above the roulette table. While Cakir savagely beats him with a baseball bat, another flash-back shows that Tombalaci had raided the casino and killed Cakir’s sister, whom we saw dancing with Cakir in the first flash-back. Cakir cruelly hits Tombalaci several times while Memati, his right hand-man, assists him, and the third man, Polat Alemdar, sits on the stairs watching. Cakir, out of control, keeps beating Tombalaci until Memati and Polat tell him to stop. Finally, Polat stops Cakir shooting Tombalaci. Polat returns Cakir’s watch to him—after his sister’s death he had buried it on her grave uttering the words: “time stopped after you”. Polat and Cakir hug each other, Cakir cries in pain. The scene ends as they hug each other and Cakir tells Polat “We will be the strongest!”.

Above is a crude description of the one of the “unforgettable” scenes from *Valley of the Wolves (Kurtlar Vadisi)*, the subject of this study, in

which the male solidarity between the protagonist Polat Alemdar and his best friend Cakir is strengthened and confirmed through violence and brutality towards another man, Tombalaci, who is their enemy. *Valley of the Wolves*, aired on Turkish television since 2003, portrays the story of a paramilitary hero who fights against the mafia, foreign intelligence agencies and (Kurdish) “terrorists”. The programme can be situated in relation to the development of private broadcasting and the rapid growth of the production market in the 2000s. This saw television content diversify and allowed novel formats, genres and sub-genres to flourish. Including its predecessor version, *Valley of the Wolves* has been on air for more than ten years, with almost a year-long break, producing over 300 episodes. According to Celenk (2005) *Valley of the Wolves* (*VoW*) is one of the trailblazers of the mafia-gang sub-genre that emerged after the transformation of the television market in the 2000s.

*VoW*'s high ratings and various forms of audience reaction indicate that it is well-received by its viewers. Responses to the serial have been interestingly diverse. A couple went to court for changing the names of their children to those of characters from the show; several groups from the audience gathered to perform a death prayer after the death of a main character; the Israeli Foreign Affairs Minister had an official meeting with the Turkish Ambassador about the serial; and the film version, *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* has been discussed in the US Congress as an indicator of anti-Americanism in the Middle East. *Valley of the Wolves* also triggered many academic<sup>2</sup> and public debates in Turkey and abroad, and has been criticised by the different parties of Turkish society for several reasons. The liberal critiques of *VoW* gave voice to common sense concerns about the serial, focusing on its violent content and short-term effects on children and young people. Elsewhere, left-wing criticisms implied that the serial propagates Turkish nationalism and contributes to existing Turkish-Kurdish segregation. Also, some studies on the spin-off movie production *Valley of the Wolves: Iraq*, described the *VoW* phenomenon in terms of the reproduction of aggressive, nationalist discourses (Ahmady date unspecified; Alemdar 2006; Celebi 2006; Gultekin 2006; Keloglu-Isler 2006; Yanik 2009). *VoW*'s agenda setting nature, along with its high ratings, has been interpreted as a consequence of the poverty and dissatisfaction of young people who transfer their fantasies to the fictional universe of the programme (Kentel *et al.* 2007).

Acknowledging the criticisms mentioned above, I argue that the crucial point which facilitates and maintains *VoW*'s popularity has been disregarded by these approaches: namely the fact that the programme's “preferred” meanings and viewing pleasures are framed by gender. As well as being a

nationalist and aggressive media production, *VoW* is a serial about men (Ozsoy 2006; Bora and Bora 2010) and “for men”. Due to this positioning as a story of masculinity, *VoW* is regularly viewed by various “interpretive communities”, such as leftists and Kurds, that one would otherwise expect to boycott the programme on the basis of its political overtones. The “masculine” characteristics of *VoW* do not only imply the gendered nature of viewing pleasures as a key feature of Turkish media culture, but also powerfully demonstrate the interpenetrated “nature” of nationalism and masculinity: nationalism is a patriarchal ideology, and nation-states are patriarchal systems that cannot be constructed without a gendered division of labour that is in favour of men.

The aims of this audience study of *VoW* are twofold. Firstly, I would like to provide some explanations and raise new questions about *VoW*'s overwhelming popularity in Turkey and consider how it corresponds to Turkish culture. In other words, my objective is to address *VoW* at the textual, interpretational and socio-historical contextual level. In empirical terms, this study can be regarded as an analysis of audience and interpretation. Secondly, at the theoretical level, my study aims to address the question of the role of television in the construction of meaning, including different phases of the cultural circuit. In this study, I critically elaborate the understanding of the phase of production as an economic/industrial process and suggest reconsidering its role as an interdiscursive category which emerges in relation to the broader social discourses that can facilitate communication with the receivers of the text. In this vein, I have divided my study into three parts: context, text and audience. It aims to demonstrate the interrelation between these different phases of the cultural circuit.

After providing a methodological discussion in Chapter One, the first part of the study addresses the socio-historical context in which *VoW* came into being, and to which it frequently refers in its *diegetic* framework. It consists of three chapters, each investigating different aspects of the social context in which the serial emerged. In the second part, I approach *VoW* as a media text, analysing its discursive characteristics and strategies focusing on the dialogues and the representation of the characters. The final part examines the way in which the members of its audience read the show and determine its meaning.

The levels of context, text and audience can be regarded as different discursive entities that infiltrate each other via different means on the one hand, and each constituting interdiscursive realms made of various discourses in competition on the other. In order to understand the relationship between these three levels, I firstly, in Chapter One, define

particular concepts such as discourse and interdiscursivity. Then I elaborate upon the seminal studies in audience research, through the questions and issues they highlight, that helped me to develop my own research design. Audience ethnographies demonstrate the necessity of problematising the position of the researcher in a field that is overwhelmed by the matrix of power relations. In this regard, I explore in depth the question of selfhood, subjectivity and power relations in the research context in order to provide a framework for the self-reflective account of my fieldwork experience. After explaining my methodological orientation, I describe the methods I employed in analysing *VoW* and in gathering the audience interpretations of the programme. In the final section, presenting a range of insights from my encounters with the viewers of *VoW*, I address my fieldwork experience focusing on the issues of gender, ethnicity and social status.

The second chapter presents a historical account of Turkish nationalism in order to illustrate the broad characteristics of the political culture and intellectual sources from which *VoW* derives its meaning. In illustrating the particular nature of modern Turkish nationalism, it is necessary for us to acknowledge the existence of different nationalisms in competition with each other during the modern period. As such, I argue that the Turkish-Islam synthesis has constituted the hegemonic form of Turkish nationalism since World War I and the end of the Ottoman Empire, even though the systematic formulation of this position was not accomplished until the 1980 *coup d'état*. To put it clearly, the present day assumption of the complementary characteristics of Turkishness and Islam is not a relatively new phenomenon but rather had long been a ruling principle of the Turkish elites who decided and shaped the formation of the Turkish nation-state according to them. This point is significant in investigating the discursive characteristics of *VoW*, since the serial makes references to the period from WW1, the constitution of the Turkish nation-state, and positions the protagonist's fight in a continuum with the *National Struggle* (1919-1923). Furthermore, I argue that the main characters of *VoW*, such as the protagonist, Polat Alemdar, are inspired by the cadres of the nationalist youth movement involved in paramilitary activities. Turkish nationalism provides the common account that enables the audience to interact with the text and construct its meaning. In this respect, it is important to demonstrate the political sources of *VoW*'s text in order to address the interdiscursive matrix through which the serial is produced and read.

Nationalist ideologies imagine men as saviours, rescuers and makers of the nation-state; nationalism interpellates them as the primary subjects. In line with this, nation-states are patriarchal structures which are based on the gender division of labour, attributing particular roles and practices to women

and men. Chapter Three illustrates the significance of gender divisions in terms of nationalism and the role of masculinity in producing and reproducing nationalisms. Emphasising the interdependence of nationalism and gender, as well as identifying the social relations, formations and mechanisms which articulate masculinities with nationalist identities, is important for this study. It is also important in how we understand the discourse of the serial and the way in which it communicates with its viewers. Polat Alemdar, the paramilitary protagonist of *VoW*, appeals to the viewers via nationalist/masculine discourses of heroism, aggression, violence, bravery, and patriotism, which are facilitated by way of reference to *eskiyaneş* (banditry) and *kabadayineş* (bravado), masculine identities from Turkish history. Hence, I discuss how nationalist narratives promote, produce and encourage particular masculinities and vice versa. In this respect, I identify militarist and nationalist Turkish masculinities as the predecessors of the paramilitary hero of the programme.

Chapter Four introduces a detailed picture of the national and international public debates about *VoW* and audience reactions to it. *VoW* is not only a television programme: many spin-offs such as films, books and new series emerged after the serial's initial popularity. It has gradually become a substantial media franchise thanks to intense public attention. The themes of the serial, and the way in which *VoW* represents them, place the programme at the heart of different public debates in contemporary Turkey, such as the Kurdish question, the status of Cyprus, the Israel-Palestine conflict, the Iraq War and so on. However, despite its interventions in public debates, *VoW* continues to be a televisual product that maintains its popularity first and foremost by regularly penetrating everyday life in the context of entertainment. Chapter Four, therefore, provides an illustrative framework for understanding the key features of Turkish television culture and the particular conditions of the Turkish television market in which *VoW* emerged.

In Chapter Five, I approach *VoW* as a televisual text, focusing on the discursive strategies employed in its narrative construction. The sample employed for my discourse analysis of the serial consists of the version that was broadcasted in the period 2003-2005. Here, I focus on how the nationalist discourse of *VoW* is constructed and how it supports gender representations. However, I also seek to question the dominant segregation between textual approaches and audience research in the interdisciplinary field of Media Studies. Given that the duality of textual discourse-audience interpretations must be dialectically reconsidered, I present the textual analysis of the serial as an investigation of a kind of "preferred reading" which will be examined empirically through my audience research in the

following part of the study. Nonetheless, reception must occur around a text, and a rigorous textual analysis of the programme remains crucial in introducing *VoW* to the reader, in order that they can subsequently make an informed assessment of the detailed audience accounts of the serial.

The reception analysis component of the study is based on in-depth interviews conducted with thirty-seven viewers of *VoW* in 2010. In the final chapter, my aim is to discuss how audience members interpret the discourse of *VoW*, and how they articulate it in relation to nationalist and patriarchal discourses (or, indeed, how they disarticulate it from them). *VoW*'s popularity is such that it has been followed by audiences from different social backgrounds. As such, my sample consists of people from various age groups, occupations, and classes even though I took ethnicity (Kurdish and Turkish) and gender as primary categories in selecting the participants. I present the audience readings of the serial in five substantive sections. Firstly, I discuss the interviewees' everyday television viewing practices and the meanings they attribute to television in order to demonstrate the context in which *VoW* viewing practice takes place. Secondly, I examine how the serial constructs a kind of an "illusion" of reality due to its frequent reference to the contemporary political agenda. In the third and fourth sections, I look at the ways in which the viewers evaluate the serial's discourse in relation to their own gendered experiences. Finally, I focus on the "critical" approaches of those viewers who chose to contest the serial's discourse because of their ethnic, political and occupational identities.

*VoW* is a significant case study that can contribute to the way we understand the extent to which the media serves up a hotchpotch of different contesting identities, meanings and values. No doubt, this hotchpotch mediates the direction of the power relations, in the case of *VoW* particularly between Turks and Kurds, and women and men. Understanding how national(ist) heroes or heroic masculinities penetrate viewers' imagination via television can lead us to address the ways in which nationalism negatively nourishes fantasies of heroic masculinity (and *vice versa*) through gender representations on television. In this study, my aim is to pursue the cultural traces that embed nationalism and masculinity in a cultural form of heroic masculinity while demonstrating the extent to which they are contemporaneously bound together and reproduced by the media.

# CHAPTER ONE

## CONTEXT, TEXT AND AUDIENCE

### **The Audience in an Interdiscursive Realm**

One can argue that literary and psychoanalytical approaches to television reception infer particular reading positions according to the text or the reader's social position. Although one can acknowledge the relevance of these theories in explaining particular reading positions, they remain insufficient in understanding the active engagement of different discursive formations of readership, text and other social discourses. As television penetrates everyday life on a regular and continuous basis, the nature of television audiencehood is dynamic and complex and cannot be solely contained within the moment of consumption and limited to one particular message which is conveyed by the television programme. In order to capture the complexity of these relations, I refer to the concept of interdiscursivity, which is able to grasp the process of the construction of meaning with reference to television. In this vein, this study aims to understand audience interpretations of a television text as an interdiscursive practice which integrates various social discourses on nationalism, masculinity, and television audiencehood.

Before focusing on interdiscursivity, one needs to clarify the conceptualisations of discourse. Two particular approaches to the concept can be distinguished: discourse as a theory, and discourse as a linguistic and semiotic approach. Discourse theory encompasses different traditions, such as structuralism, hermeneutics and Marxism (Howarth 2012, 10) and has been defined in various ways by scholars such as Foucault, Derrida, and Laclau and Mouffe. According to Foucault, discourse refers to "historically specific systems of meaning which form the identities of subjects and objects" (Howarth 2012, 9). He identifies *discursive formations* as the general enunciative systems that govern a group of verbal performances (Foucault 2002, 130) which constitute discourses as particular entities. Foucault's discourse theory addresses the extent to which social structures and institutions historically produce and maintain particular approaches and

engender certain regimes of truth, placing relationships of power at the core of his analysis. Discourse theory has radically questioned the monolithic understanding of ideology as an all-encompassing unit and revealed the contradictions and gaps immanent within it. However, the ambiguity of Foucault's work on the issue of distinguishing the discursive from the non-discursive (Howarth 2012) and his intricate definitions of subject position, power and domination and his "insistence upon the subject as an effect of discursive formations [...] which excludes active social agency" (Fairclough 1993, 45) constitute problems with his study.

Linguistic and semiotic approaches to discourse are primarily interested in texts and the social and institutional production of meaning, focusing upon textual features such as syntax, grammar, textual style, vocabulary, cohesion, genre and so on. These studies encompass several perspectives, such as conversation analysis, semiotics, social psychology, sociolinguistics and rhetoric, and are part of a large body of analysis which can be labelled discourse analysis or Discourse Studies. Van Dijk (2007, xxiii) defines Discourse Studies as "the systematic and explicit analysis of the various structures and strategies of different levels of text and talk". Critical Discourse Analysis, which has recently developed as a branch of Discourse Studies, on the other hand, aims to reveal "opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power, and control as manifested in language" (Wodak 1995, 173). In this vein, according to Wodak (2008, 6) discourse "implies patterns and commonalities of knowledge and structures", whereas van Dijk (1990, 164) defines it as "text in context". In accordance with the linguistic and semiotic approaches to the concept, since my main focus is the interpretation of a particular television text, I utilise discourse in the narrow sense of the term corresponding to "constructions or significations of some domain of social practice from a particular perspective" (Fairclough 2011, 94), and discourse analysis as a systematic exploration of those constructions or significations with reference to the concept of power.

It is worth emphasising that discourse refers to "language use as a form of social practice" (Fairclough 1993, 63) which is exercised through different forms of social power. Both Hall (1996) and Fairclough (1993) emphasise that hegemony complements discourse as the former allows one to conceptualise the evolution of power as a dialectical process in which different subjects conflict over social domination as well as the construction of meaning. Hegemony can be regarded as a form of "domination by ideas and cultural forms that induce consent to the rule of the leading groups in a society" which is constituted by "the ruling intellectual and cultural forces of the era" (Kellner 2005, 158). Gramsci elucidates that "hegemony is not

wholly consensual but consists of a synthesis of consent and coercion, an equilibrium in which force plays a role but is not dominant” (Swingewood 2000, 118). Hegemony is a relational concept which also attributes power and agency (the extent of which is determined by particular social conditions) to the dominated social groups. In other words, hegemony is a field of struggle rather than a fixed and absolute form of domination.

Following Fairclough (1993, 86), I have an understanding of “discourse in relation to ideology and to power, and place discourse within a view of power as hegemony, and a view of evolution of power relations as hegemonic struggle”. As Purvis and Hunt (1993, 476) aptly put it:

“If ‘discourse’ and ‘ideology’ both figure in accounts of the general field of social action mediated through communicative practices, then ‘discourse’ focuses upon the internal features of those practices, in particular their linguistic and semiotic dimensions. On the other hand, ‘ideology’ directs attention towards the external aspects of focusing on the way in which lived experience is connected to notions of interest and position that are in principle distinguishable from lived experience.”

That is to say, discourse and ideology are not exclusive concepts; particularly in the context of this study. While ideology is able to “discriminate between those power struggles which are somehow central to a whole form of social life, and those which are not” (Eagleton 2007, 8), discourse allows us to map out the extent to which ideology operates on linguistic and semiotic levels.

It is also important to acknowledge the articulations and penetrations of various discourses in order to identify the ways in which relations of power are constructed in different levels and forms by different social groups. For a better understanding of how particular discourses are produced in different social contexts (*e.g.* media, politics, everyday life) and the extent to which particular discourses interact and intermingle with others, I suggest employing the concept of interdiscourse. Interdiscourse can be traced back to Voloshinov’s writings on intertextuality, and are also discussed by Kristeva, Pecheux, Fairclough and others. Kristeva regards text as a permutation of different texts embodying “society’s dialogic conflict over the meaning of words” (Allen 2012, 36). Intertextuality, in other words, is a way of redefining texts as collectively produced entities which are formed through social conflict over the construction of meaning. According to Fairclough (1993), intertextuality can take two different forms. Manifest intertextuality refers to the identifiable combination of different texts within the text in question, such as quotations from other sources. Constitutive intertextuality or interdiscourse, on the other hand, is an implicit feature of

the text in which different texts are incorporated in the production of the text (Fairclough 1993, 104). In this respect, I deploy the term interdiscourse to address the relations among different discourses as well as different generic formations of discourse. Morley (1994, 59) emphasises that

“the concept of interdiscourse transforms the relation of one text/one subject to that of a multiplicity of texts/subjects relations, in which encounters can be understood not in isolation but only in the moments of their combination.”

In other words, interdiscourse allows us to conceptualise audience interpretations as complex and multiple discourses which inherently combine, articulate and configure various discursive formations. Interdiscourse is also able to respond to the contradiction which is immanent in encoding (text) and decoding (interpretation) practices—*i.e.* the fact there is only one way of coding but multiple ways of reading.

Media produce particular discourses which usually operate through representations. Drawing on semiotics and Foucault’s discourse theory, Hall argues that representation is a symbolic order which is mediated through the different forms of “language”, including written texts, pictures, photographs, films *etc.* He distinguishes three particular approaches to the representation of meaning through language: reflective, intentional, and constructionist. In the reflective approach, language is considered to operate like a “natural” mirror that reflects the “object, person, idea or event in the real world” as they come into being (Hall 2003 [1997], 24). The term *mimesis* has been used to refer to this approach corresponding to the imitating relationship between art works and nature since the period of Ancient Greece. In opposition to reflectionism, the intentional approach regards language as being encoded according to the intentions of its author, and thus as the sole source of the meaning that is intended to be produced. According to the intentional approach, any language system, from texts to visual images, are thought to be fixed entities, the meanings of which are imposed by the creator. The social constructionist view challenges these one-dimensional understandings of language and representation, suggesting a more sophisticated conceptualisation of meaning construction. Recognising the social character of language, which is constantly being made and re-made, the constructionist approach emphasises the active role of subjects and institutions in “the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate” (Hall 2003 [1997], 25). The constructionist approach also acknowledges the power relations involved in the meaning-making process and the contesting discourses over the production of meaning. This means that the meaning conveyed through language is not limited to its creators’ intentions and neither does it emerge

solely through imitations of the real world. Rather it is constructed via the continuous social exchange between different social actors within the frame of power relations.

“In other words, the question of meaning arises in relation to all the different moments and practices in our ‘cultural circuit’—in the construction of identity and the marking of the difference, in production and consumption, as well as in the regulation of social conduct” (Hall 2003 [1997], 4).

Given that television products communicate to the audience through encoded meaning and pleasure patterns, how the *diegesis* of a particular programme is constructed in dialogue with other social texts and discourses must also be examined. In order to understand the text’s communicative potential with the audience, it is important to reveal the discursive strategies and interdiscursive formations employed within the text. The common cultural repertoires upon which communication can be built, exist before the television content is encoded. While producers create a new economic value with television programmes, they exploit existing cultural codes and values in order to facilitate communication. Thus, the construction of meaning and the eventual production of television content are not only the sum of production relations and means. Conversely, television texts are produced in relation to different texts and are constructed upon the accumulation and articulation of historical and political discourses that are related to those particular texts. In other words, the production of meaning in television is not limited to the technical process of generating the concept of the show, scriptwriting, preparations of production, *etc.* Instead, it must also be examined in terms of interdiscursivity, regarding the relation of the context and the text to existing discourses and social practices, since “[r]epresentation functions less like the model of a one-way transmitter and more like the model of a dialogue—it is, as they say, dialogic” (Hall 2003 [1997], 10).

In order to address the interplay between different discursive practices in the processes of text production and consumption, that is, the process of the construction of meaning through the media, I suggest three particular levels of examination: context, text (representation), and audience. Following Hall (2006 [1973], 164), who emphasises the determinacy of the text that occupies a “privileged position in the communicative exchange”, I argue that the text stands at the core of this three level analysis as the meeting point between the context and the audience. That is to say, texts communicate with their readers through the meanings that are derived from the common socio-cultural context and are re-constructed or encoded in the form of a media product.

## The Audience in Exploration

According to Evans (1990 cited in Morley 1999, 18) recent work on the media is “characterised by two assumptions; (a) that audience is always active (in a non-trivial sense); and (b) that media content is ‘polysemic’, or open to interpretation”. In other words, the fundamental premise behind the interdisciplinary field of audience studies is that the audience is an active subject who can attribute different meanings to a given text and can potentially challenge it. Since audiences are considered social agents that consume media texts with different motivations and outcomes, researching audiences gains its complex form of addressing the various dimensions of reception such as everyday life, identities and consumption practices. Morley and Silverstone (1990) emphasise the complexity of television viewing practices, suggesting a “double focus” on television viewing:

“so that, for instance, we can understand viewing as, *simultaneously*, a ritual whose function is to structure domestic life and provide a symbolic mode of participation in the national community *and* an active mode of consumption and production, *and* as a process operating within the realm of ideology” (Morley 1999, 276).

Beginning with Morley’s *Nationwide* research, two key points have become significant in audience studies: (1) locating television in everyday life; and (2) the relationship between the social identities of the viewers and their styles of reading. Following Hall’s model, suggested in his encoding/decoding article, Morley and Brundson (1999 [1978]) analyse how the popular news programme *Nationwide* is understood by its viewers, focusing on their class positions which presumably frame their readings. Morley’s later work (1999) problematises everyday life, in which television viewing is a common practice, and scrutinises the gendered power relations within the household which the television viewing practices articulate. In a similar vein, Hobson (1982) investigates how the popular soap opera, *Crossroads*, is consumed by women through different practices of viewing and talking. Watching the drama with women, Hobson observed how television accompanies housework and childcare, whereas viewing their favourite series simultaneously provides women with a time of their own. The value of her study also lies in demonstrating the “power” of television related activities, such as television talk, which relates television to everyday life thus capturing something beyond the viewing activity itself.

The relationship between gender and viewing pleasures has not been given much significance so far in audience studies due to the difficulties of exploring pleasures empirically. Drawing on the letters received from

viewers of *Dallas*, Ang (1985) examines which sentiments and pleasures the audience attach to the programme. Regarding *Dallas* as a televisual text, Ang (1985) approaches audience reception by focusing on the textual features of the drama. In other words, she emphasises the significance of the textual characteristics of *Dallas* in mobilising audience interest in the programme whilst attributing a key role to the textual pleasures, formulating the reception of *Dallas* in a text-audience-pleasure triangle.

The contribution of Morley and the Cultural Studies approach to audience studies has been significant in several ways. First, these studies conceptualised the audience as social subjects who are members of different social groups, drawing on common cultural repertoires produced by their social formations. Secondly, they highlighted the significance of cultural and sub-cultural formation which are actively constructed and shared by the group members. Thirdly, they emphasised the role of the everyday context in which media readings take place and the significance of daily practices surrounding the viewing activity. Fourthly, this approach drew attention to the power relations in the viewing spaces, for example domestic households, which affect programme preferences and viewing habits. Finally, these studies explored the complex interaction between micro-processes and macro-structures, attempting to relate different audience interpretations with social structures.

The “domination” of ethnography, both in the epistemological and methodological sense, is evident in contemporary reception studies. Cultural Studies scholars advocated the necessity of ethnography for audience studies and employed it in their work (Morley 1999; Ang 1985). However, there is a significant difference between recent audience ethnographies and the methodological framework of Cultural Studies. Recent ethnographies are able to portray a vivid picture of television cultures in everyday life, while approaching audiences as living subjects. For instance, Gillespie’s (1995) seminal ethnography focuses on the topics of cultural identity, ethnicity and migration when investigating media consumption of young Punjabi Londoners. She discusses how young Punjabi Londoners place themselves within the culture of consumption, in the ways they deal with their parents’ expectations and a culture that challenge these expectations, and the key role that television plays in these cultural processes. Her study demonstrates “that the media ethnography may be placed usefully at the core of studies of immigration and diasporic communities and postmodern identity formations” (Seiter 2002, 11). In a similar vein, television contributes a great deal to national identity formation and has been used by nationalist movements to provoke national sentiments. As such it allows for the exploration of national cultures through ethnographic studies of television.

For example, Abu-Lughod (2005, 7) implies that television is a key institution for producing the national culture in Egypt. Following Benedict Anderson's argument regarding "the imagined communities", she suggests that television "might have roles to play in producing nations and national feelings and in shaping national imaginaries" (Abu-Lughod 2005, 8). Similarly, Mankekar's (1999) study of notions of womanhood in "postcolonial" India emphasises the state's efforts to profit from television in sustaining "national integration" and "national development". Her research draws on an ethnographic study of twenty-five Hindu, Sikh and Muslim families who watch the public channel, *Doordarshan*, particularly the dramas which promote a modernist pan-Indian culture. Both of these studies highlight the role of television in the construction of national identities and how this function of television can be articulated within the complexity of everyday life and the making of selfhood.

However, the fact that television is easily accessible and available in homes for everyday use has led media researchers to place too much emphasis on everyday life. Television viewing is not more embedded in everyday life than other daily social practices. Livingstone (2002) criticises ethnographies for providing a complex description of everyday life instead of focusing on the instances in which the media text encounters the audience. She concludes that Media Studies must locate media, rather than everyday life at the centre of their investigation (Livingstone 2002, 21). Furthermore, conceptions of what constitutes "everyday life" usually remain unquestioned in many ethnographies. It is difficult to address issues of gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, or religion fully by solely focusing on the micro-processes and relating them to broader social discourses. Instead, we need to conceptualise everyday life as a layer in which viewers encounter media texts and consume them through other related activities.

No doubt, the questions that audience research has focused upon have changed in light of the new reception practices which have been transformed through the internet and digital technologies. Young people and children, who are actively engaged in the new media environment, are considered social groups to be explored in the field of Media Studies. In researching young people's use of new media, Livingstone (2002) highlights that internet technologies did not entirely challenge the popularity of television. Nevertheless, the studies on new media audiences remind us of the necessity for reconsidering the position of television in a changing media environment (Livingstone 2004). Situated within the premises of active reading and polysemy (pre-defined by the limits of the text), holding particular cultural formations as social subjects, being actively engaged in power relations, dealing with the complexities of everyday life and changing technologies,

viewers of *VoW* epitomise the complex matrix upon which audiencehood is formed.

### **Questions of Selfhood and Subjectivity in Audience Research**

In 2007, the Turkish regulatory body, the *Radio and Television Supreme Council*, received more than thirteen thousand phone calls complaining about *Valley of the Wolves Terror*, a spin-off of *Valley of the Wolves*, just after the initial trailer was broadcast but before the show itself had been aired. I was one of them. My attitude towards the serial was a strong one and is probably different from that of Hobson toward *Crossroads* and Mankekar's toward *Mahabharata*. My complaint about *VoW* was a reaction which was not thoughtfully considered. I had not watched *VoW* regularly but I was nonetheless irritated by the popularity of "such chauvinism" on television. I felt it contributed to the existing segregation between Kurds and Turks and provoked aggression towards vulnerable Kurds who were living in predominantly Turkish-populated cities because of the displacement resulting from the on-going war. *VoW Terror* was cancelled after the broadcast of the second episode because of implicit pressure from the *Radio and Television Supreme Council* which was concerned about any kind of discussion of the Kurdish question apart from official discourse. However, the serial was re-aired after a couple of months with a new name, *Valley of the Wolves Ambush*, in which the fight of the paramilitary hero against Kurdish "terrorists" was only a small part of the series and the ethnicity of the "enemy" was not made explicit. As this example explicitly demonstrates, popular culture is a site of struggle, a "battlefield where no once-for-all victories are obtained but where there are always strategic positions to be won and lost" (Hall 1981, 233).

After the assassination in January 2007 of the Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, just before *VoW Terror* was on air, by a young, male nationalist who was in-touch with Turkish intelligence, I found myself thinking about *VoW* as a research topic. Being "opposed to" *VoW*, I wondered why the serial was embraced by so many individuals from such varying social backgrounds and how it appealed to its viewers. Hence, my position as a researcher was pre-determined by my pre-research positionings, influenced by my social and political identities as well as the contemporary social agenda. According to Mies (cited in Wolf 1996, 26), feminist research requires "an intervention" into the existing order, making changes in one's life and awareness. Even though, I find it problematic to reduce political action to academic practice, I think that, like popular culture, research or in the broader sense academic study, is a political site which is framed by certain power relations. Wolf

(1996, 2) describes three dimensions of power inherent in the research process:

“(1) power differences stemming from different positionalities of the researcher and the researched (race, class, nationality, life chances, urban-rural backgrounds); (2) power exerted during the research process, such as defining the research relationship, unequal exchange, and exploitation; and (3) power exerted during the postfieldwork period—writing and representing.”

Social differences between the researcher and the researched subjects, the social settings in which the research takes place, and the way in which the researcher presents the data are political questions which must be addressed as part of the research. That is to say, the researcher cannot usually overcome the power inequalities that are (re)produced in the research environment and in the writing phase. However, s/he can problematise these relations within her/his research framework. Reflexivity, referring to the “concern with how the selves and identities of the researcher and the researched affect the research process” (Brewer 2009, 126), can be employed as a counter-strategy for questioning the position of the research and the researcher. According to Altheide and Johnson (1998 cited in Brewer 2009, 127) “the main meaning of reflexivity is that the scientific observer is part and parcel of the setting, context and culture he or she is trying to understand and represent”. In this sense, what I described as “the context” in which the “sender” and the “receiver” are actively engaged and can each occupy others’ positions in different instances of communication, is also the context in which this research is formulated, conducted and produced. To put it clearly, my controversial position towards patriarchy and nationalism that I present as the context in which *VoW* is produced also constitutes the context of my research.

The subjectivity of the researcher in audience studies is problematised in two respects. Firstly, there is the problem of participant observation in exploring the viewing practices which requires entering the private domain and penetrating the viewer’s living room (Morley 1999; Hobson 1982; Mankekar 1999; Livingstone 2004). Either the viewers’ record diaries, or the researcher accompanies the viewers during their television viewing. There is no way of capturing the television viewing activity in the household as it happens. It is difficult to “naturalise” the attendance of the researcher to the viewing activity as her/his existence turns the everyday life of people into a research environment for them. That is to say, participant observation in the household has the risk of fixing the positions of the researcher and the researched, particularly attaching “the outsider” identity to the researcher.

Secondly, the problem of subjectivity in audience research is raised by audience ethnographies which suggest the need for a self-reflective approach toward issues regarding the researcher's position in the field in terms of gender, ethnicity and class inequalities (Gillespie 1995; Mankekar 1999; Abu-Lughod 2005). This suggests the necessity of evaluating the implications of the power relations involved in fieldwork and in the construction and presentation of the data as an analysis of such fieldwork.

Even though subjectivity is often understood in a negative sense, positioned as it is in opposition to the positivist notion of "objectivity" and identified with "bias", it can in fact contribute to the research in several ways. McRobbie (1982, 55) argues that the researcher's "subjectivity can often add to the force of research, just as our precise political position will inflect our argument this way or that, as will our private fascinations, our personal obsessions, and our odd erotic moments". The social agency of the researcher can empower the researched subjects and *vice versa*; both can fortify the intellectual value of the research as well as having an impact beyond the research context.

## The Method of the Study

I designed this research in three parts, each of which correspond to different phases of the circuit of culture. I discuss the broader social context in which *VoW* was created, regarding it as the initial phase of production in the cultural circuit. By discussing the evaluation of nationalism and masculinities in the Turkish context, my aim is to trace *VoW*'s location as a television product in the history of nationalism and to reveal its position in the matrix of nationalist discourses. Turkish nationalism forms the common communicative ground for the Turkish audience and facilitates audience attachment to the serial. That is to say, without examining nationalism and (nationalist) masculinities, it is difficult to address the ways in which the audience identify with and interpret *VoW*. Without doubt, the social context that I choose to analyse in my research is inferred from the text and, hence, a textual analysis is central to drawing other levels of analysis into my study. The textual analysis is also able to provide clues, references, and even patterns for the audience readings. It can be taken as a preliminary ground for highlighting aspects of the audience readings, as it is also an analysis *per se*.

I define three analytical levels echoing the context, text, and audience trio, which can help in understanding the popularity of *VoW* for different interpretive communities. The first level is the "grand narrative" which denotes the construction of Turkish nationalism, particularly the Turkish-

Islam synthesis, that sets both the political climate in which the serial is produced and the reference point of the programme that the discourse of the serial constructs itself through particular inclusions and exclusions. Hence, the Turkish-Islam synthesis, as a patriarchal nationalist ideology, is the first level of the narrative, which is not only the hegemonic discourse of the historical moment in which the serial emerged but also the core value system according to which the programme is constructed. The second level of narrative is simply the serial itself as a televisual text, which reproduces Turkish nationalism through its plot, characters, dialogues *etc.* as demonstrated by the textual analysis of *VoW*. The audience interpretations, which stand on the intersection of these two levels constitute the third level of narrative. It is important to note that audience interpretation is not an individual process in which one sits in the living room and enjoys the show for ninety minutes, but is rather a social interaction process that includes different practices, such as talking about the programme, following public debates about it, and consuming different sorts of products related to it<sup>3</sup>.

### **Textual Analysis of *Valley of the Wolves***

There are many difficulties in dealing with an episodic text which is fragmented according to the logic of the flow of television content. The duration of the each episode of *VoW* is approximately ninety minutes, which makes the serial almost a feature-length film experience for its viewers. The long duration is not specific to *VoW* and has been the current tendency in the production of television dramas in Turkey. Audiences do not seem distracted or bored, but rather are willing to consume long dramas as well as reality television and game shows. However, if considered from an analytical perspective, it is difficult to examine each episode in-detail as a separate entity, such as cinema scholars do with feature films. Instead, I have chosen to take the first version of *VoW* as a whole, which begins with the first episode, in which the protagonist Polat Alemdar initiates a secret mission, and ends with the ninety-seventh episode, when Polat and his companions complete their “Valley of the Wolves” operation. In taking such a step, my aim is (1) to reveal the nationalist discourse of the serial which gradually manifests itself more explicitly, (2) to address the *diegesis* upon which the protagonists’ heroic masculinity is established, and (3) to emphasise the discursive continuity which enables the audiences to easily attach themselves to the show.

The limits of this study do not allow me to provide comprehensive analyses of *VoW Terror* or the later spin-off, *VoW Ambush*, although I have followed both regularly. Nevertheless, it is important to point out the

discursive shift from a Turkish-Islam synthesis to neo-Ottomanism that has taken place with *VoW Ambush*, and how the series has been able to convert itself into the *zeitgeist* promoted by the neoliberal-Islamist *Justice and Development* government, whilst still remaining overwhelmingly misogynistic. Although my interview questionnaire was focused on the characters and missions of *VoW*, who remain mostly unchanged in *VoW Ambush*, it was more likely that the interviewees could refer to the *Ambush* series rather than the initial version of the show, simply because the latter would be easier to remember. Fortunately, the interviewees considered the serial as a continuous narrative and were interested in the story in which Ali Candan changes his appearance through surgery to become Polat Alemdar and to fight against the enemies of the state on behalf of the intelligence service<sup>4</sup>.

Before adopting an analytical approach to the serial as a televisual text, I chose to watch *VoW* merely as a means of entertainment in order to allow myself to understand different audience subjectivities in the later stages of my research. However, whilst I did not expect to put my analytical stance completely to one side, I did hope to engage in my first regular encounter with *VoW* from the perspective of the audience, rather than that of a researcher. This approach helped me to gain an insight into the pleasures and identifications that the serial suggests to its viewers whilst also analysing the audience's interpretations.

Since the textual analysis of the serial provides a large amount of data, which is difficult for both the researcher and the readers of this study to deal with, I first wanted to scrutinise the narrative structure to set a framework for the discourse analysis. So on the second viewing of the entire version, I aimed to reveal this narrative structure in order that it could form the ground upon which I could develop a convenient critical discourse analysis of the serial. I identified the main characters and the plot, taking *VoW* as a whole rather than focusing upon each episode. This preliminary analysis of *VoW* enabled me to highlight the discursive patterns and key events and characters that construct the show's discourse. On my third viewing, I focused on the discourses of nationalism and gender in the light of the following questions framed within the "discourse-historical approach":

1. How are persons, objects, phenomena/events, processes and actions named and referred to?
2. What characteristics, qualities and features are attributed to social actors, objects, phenomena/events and processes?
3. What arguments are employed in the discourse in question?
4. From what perspective are these nominations, attributions and arguments expressed?

5. Are the respective utterances articulated overtly, are they intensified or mitigated?" (Wodak and Reisgl 2009, 93)

According to Wodak and Reisgl (2009, 93), the discourse-historical approach is

“three-dimensional: after (1) having identified the specific *contents* or *topics* of a specific discourse, (2) *discursive strategies* are investigated. Then (3), *linguistic means* (as types) and the specific, context-dependent *linguistic realizations* (as tokens) are examined.”

After viewing *VoW* several times for the analysis, I identified in the discourse of the serial the two basic elements of nationalism namely the synthesis of Turkishness and Islam; and paramilitarism and the three basic elements of gender, violence, hierarchy and male friendship/solidarity. Although Wodak and Reisgl focus on the linguistic construction of a discourse and define what they call the discursive strategies on the basis of language, I focused on the *diegesis* which construes the discourse of the serial through events, characters, conflicts and dissolutions. I also explored the discursive strategies that are established via the narration, the life story of the protagonist and the conflicts between the characters. Finally, I examined the dialogues and the actions of the characters and the character formations that are established metaphorically. *VoW*'s didactic tone in which the characters lecture and preach to the viewers about the homeland, patriotism, and heroic masculinity, along with its tendency to propagandise in the form of political manifestos that regularly appear in every other episode, lent itself well to the “discourse-historical approach”.

### **Audience Interviews**

I conducted in-depth and group interviews with thirty-seven viewers of *VoW* from different social backgrounds. The interviews took place during a three month period in 2010 in various places such as cafes and the interviewee's homes or workplaces in three cities: Ankara, Zonguldak and Dersim (Tunceli). These three locations provided me with a convenient research environment, as well as a social circle, through which I could reach the audiences since I lived in Ankara, my parents were living in Zonguldak and I am originally from Dersim. To contact my interviewees, I relied on one key person in Zonguldak and Dersim and more than one in Ankara. In order to break out of the circle of acquaintances who might have a similar social status I avoided interviewing the people found by the key persons but instead asked them to introduce me to other people whom I then interviewed.