

# POLITICS OF NAMES IN TRANSNATIONAL TELEVISION ADAPTATIONS

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**Abstract:** *In the transnational flow of television series, adaptations represent a challenge for screenwriters. In addition to adapting the story to a new cultural context, it is important to see how the characters are constructed from the perspective of names. Thus, this article aims to make a critical analysis upon character names in transnational television adaptation, highlighting their meaning and their correlation within the Romanian cultural identity.*

**Key words:** *television adaptations, screenwriter, name, identity, culture*

## 1. Introduction

Choosing the names of characters in TV series and movies is an important step that every scriptwriter considers when creating their story. Character construction is a complex process that requires socio-psychological and linguistic knowledge. That is why it is important to talk about much more elaborate approaches that require detailed research into the cultural identity background, namely the transnational adaptation of various TV series. Here, adaptation does not occur spatially, or stand in translating and imitating the original character, but rather a new version of the character is constructed and configured in accordance with local values and beliefs. Thus, the name reflects the cultural background and encompasses the spiritual essence of the society in which it is placed. Special attention was given to the unique way in which these characters were named, but also the wealth of cultural identity connotations they hold. Considering this aspect, this article aims to observe and analyze the way in which Romanian screenwriters named their characters in the context of adapting Turkish TV series in the Romanian space. Thus, this paper discusses the characters in the series *Fructul Oprit*, *Adela*, *Vlad* and *Clanul*, the Romanian version of the Turkish TV series *Aşk-ı Memnu*, *O hayat benim*, *Ezel* and *İçerde*.

## 2. Importance of Names in Transnational Adaptations

It is well known that research in the field of cinema and television adaptation dates in Western academia since 1948<sup>2</sup>. However, less importance in the study area has been

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given to character names in television series. In the last decade, reflections on this matter have been made upon topics such as imaginative names for imaginary friends (Bugheşiu, 2018), characteristics of names and the role of indexing them (Husevåg, 2018), or humorous function of anthroponyms (Gibka, 2017). Similarly, Naruszewicz-Duchlińska's (2016a, 2016b) studies in this field highlight the creativity of translations showed in titles of television series, and, she makes an insightful analysis of their headlines. Combining onomastic theories with scriptwriting perspectives, or television production strategies, academics in the field (see Bozkurt & Mohammadi, 2023; Mubarakshina et al., 2019; Bugheşiu, 2018; Husevåg, 2018; Zhang, Xu, Lu, Huang, 2009;) came up with new visions about the functions of names. However, as a point of reference, onomastics and onomastic theories enjoy special attention in scientific research, due to its interdisciplinary character. Researchers from different fields such as sociologists, historians, ethnographers, writers or linguists have been concerned over time about the study of names. Those types of studies that have been made in the last decade represent a ground-breaking perspective in the field of socio-onomastic and represent remarkable approaches in the field of screen productions.

Naming practices and rituals have occurred since the beginning of the world and are intended to guide the human being in the existential context. Furthermore, names stand as a social identification and highlight the importance of a human being in society as it serves legal and administrative purposes (Dumitraşcu, 2020). In addition to these functions, we must mention not only that the name represents the symbol of identity, but also that it reflects the individual's belonging to a certain religion, language and social origin.

In the context of television adaptations, the role of the screenwriter is to create a separate identity for each character, and an important step in this endeavor is the name. The narrative thread of the story is the one that outlines individual social stability and predestines the names under cultural-linguistic patterns, some of which can be influenced by a specific culture (Iordan, 1979; Zăbava, 2009) or ethnicity (Felecan, 2011), and sometimes these can be associated by diminutives (Iluţ, 2017) or even nicknames (Cristoreanu, 2015).

### **3. Names in Television Adaptations**

In the collective mind, the name can be associated with certain characteristics of the character (in particular, with character traits). According to Mariana Istrate (2000:27), in literary works, the name is not only an index but acquires the quality of a literary symbol. Like literature, the names of characters in films and television series reveal the correlation that the screenwriter has designed to present the individual character and the ability of the name to support its meaning. Thus, by choosing the names of the characters, the screenwriter specifies their identity and offers the viewer the opportunity to make certain connections and comparisons with particular people interactions (that have similar names) in everyday life, with historical figures, public personas, and many other mental connections.

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<sup>2</sup> See André Bazin's book: "Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest"

A good example here is the main character in the series *Vlad*. As a series adaptation, first and foremost the first comparison is made with the eponymous character of the Turkish series *Ezel*, then, because the story is an adaptation of the book *The Count of Monte Cristo*, the viewer weighs the similar traits that the two characters in question have. The mechanisms for creating the character allowed the scriptwriter to create his character according to universal traits, adapted to the Romanian cultural context. Furthermore, the name supports the character and highlights the socio-identity relationship. Thus, the name Vlad in the Romanian tradition is closely related to the glorious history. Mostly associated with *Vlad Țepeș* or *Vlad Dracul* who was known for his cruelty towards captured enemies, that he often impaled (from here also known as *Vlad the Impaler*). The etymology of the name has Slavic origins and means “to rule or the ruler”. The meaning emphasizes even more the path of our protagonist, that has a specific purpose that has already been drawn up. In the Romanian series, Vlad came to replace Adrian to take revenge on those who betrayed him. In analogy with the historical figure *Vlad the Impaler*, he has a severe plan built in detail to defeat his enemies. Always in search of justice and the defense of his own family, Vlad proves strength and engages in consistent action in all the steps that he takes. As we notice, scriptwriters managed to frame up a strong character in accordance with the ancestral roots of Romanians.

However, both in cinematography and in television series, the names of the characters can receive specific and special meanings through the context, accordingly, the story in which they are placed. Thus, the names of the characters end up being their own names in context. In the study of the television series proposed in this analysis, we notice that the name of the main character also becomes the name of the series (e.g., Vlad, Adela). Moreover, if we look at the Turkish series broadcast in Romania, we notice that many times the translation of their original title in Romanian language is done by association with the main character. Although the original title provides other details of the content of the creative product, in this case the series; the translators chose to correlate the title with the name of the main character, so that Romanians were more attentive to the narrative thread that was created around a character, than to the general context of the series. For example *Mühteşem Yüzyıl/ Magnificent Century*(2011-2014), became *Suleyman Magnificul ( Magnificent Suleyman)*; *Bir Zamanlar Çucurova/ Bitter lands* (2018-2022) became *Mă numesc Zuleyha (My name is Zuleyha)*, *O Hayat Benim/ That is my life* (2014-2017) became *Bahar: Viață Furată (Bahar: stolen life)*, *Baraj/ The Dam*(2020-2021) became *Nehir (the name of the actress in the main role)*, *Medcezir/ Ebb and Tide*(2013-2015) became *Yaman* (the name of the main character) and the list of examples can continue.

We must keep in mind that such decisions to translate series names are also an important marketing strategy, not just an artistic point of view (Naruszewicz-Duchlińska, 2016a). The title must attract the audience to watch the production. Thus, screenwriters must ensure that the adaptation in cultural context is carried out in accordance with social and political norms. In this case, the title can define its success or failure simply by being a hook in attracting viewers. Choosing to name a series after the main character is a good and often used method by translators and even screenwriters, because in this

way linguistic errors of ad litteram translation are avoided. Furthermore, the name of a person or, better said, the main character tends to be the easiest form of identification and association in the case of TV series and their adaptations. Thus, we can easily realize that the basic idea of the story is built around the character and his journey.

#### 4. Cultural Roots of the Names

Many names used in the Romanian culture have religious references, representing saints celebrated in the Orthodox Christian calendar. It is believed that the saint's name that a person receives at baptism will guide his/ her life and stands as a symbol of the Christian faith (Bălan, 1993). Moreover, the names chosen for the characters of the series are no exception to this rule<sup>3</sup>. More than a half of the names in each individual Romanian television adaptation of the Turkish series have a specific religious signification. Even more, religion or more explicitly Orthodoxy, plays a primordial role in defining Romanians and Romanian culture. Religion, next to language and place, represents one of the three pillars that define our cultural identity. Therefore, the act of naming is a rather difficult task not only in the context of everyday life, but especially in character construction when we talk about scripts and television adaptations.

Thorough research before constructing and placing characters on the scenario, helps screenwriters with clarity. Thus, it is essential to pay attention to small details such as names, when adapting from books to screen, especially when our time frame and action have changed to nowadays. The actuality of the vocabulary, and use of expressions and names must be in accordance with the time in which the action is placed. For example, in the Turkish series *Aşk-ı Memnu*, the names of the characters were kept the same as in the novel. However, Ecevit (2017, p. 57) notes that this situation created confusion for the Turkish viewers as the action took place in present times, and the names were unusual and old fashioned for the living times. On the other hand, the Romanian version used adapted Romanian names for the characters. Modorcea (2018) points toward the surname *Caragea* of the main character, that represents the name of an old Romanian noble families. The name *Caragea* is believed to have its origins in Greek-Byzantine (Phanariot) time, and their members usually occupied important positions within the Ottoman Empire. More contextual, the Romanian version of *Fructul Oprit*, managed to emphasize the social status of the character by making in-depth research before naming. However, it is clear enough

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<sup>3</sup> **In the series Adela:** Nuti which is the short form for Elena (saint Elena/ Helen celebrated in the Orthodox Chalender on 21<sup>st</sup> of May); Mitu is the short form for Dumitru (Saint Dumitru celebrated on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> of October); Andreea the girl's name version from Andrei (Saint Andrei/Andrew celebrated on 29<sup>th</sup> of November); Mihai (Saint Mihail/ Michael, celebrated on 8<sup>th</sup> of November); **In the series Vlad:** Stefan (Saint Stefan, celebrated of 27<sup>th</sup> of December); Matei (Saint Matei); Petre (Saint Petre celebrated on 29<sup>th</sup> of June); Miki abbreviation of Mihaela (The Archangel Mihail celebrated on 8<sup>th</sup> of November). **In the series Fructul Oprit:** Ana (Saint parents Ana/Anna and Ioachim, the parents of Virgin Mary, celebrated on 9<sup>th</sup> of September); Alexandru (Saint Alexandru/Alexander celebrated on 31<sup>st</sup> of August), Ioan (Saint Ioan/ John), Dan (Saint Daniel). **In the series Clanul:** Pavel (Saint Pavel/Paul celebrated on 29<sup>th</sup> of June); David (Saint David from Thessaloniki, celebrated on 26<sup>th</sup> June); Magda- short form of Magdalena (Magdalena, celebrated on 22 July) etc.

that *Caragea* represents a suitable label for the character as it is a common surname today but rooted deeply in the cultural identity of Romanians.

In the second season of *Fructul Oprit*, a new character with Turkish name and roots was introduced in the story: *Bihter*. The new character, *Bihter*, represents a cultural bound between Romania and Turkey, but also is an allusion to the original character of the book (*Aşk-ı Memnu*). The sequel of the story is constructed in a complex<sup>4</sup> way by Radu Grigore, and the Turkish character is placed smoothly into the action, highlighting the cultural bound that Romania has with Turkey. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that the character has a meaningful nickname, *Biftec*<sup>5</sup>. The nicknaming of the others is a social denominative act, being “a nominal reflex of the sarcastic spirit specific to the Romanian people” (Felecan, 2013, p. 9). The linguistic association made by the screenwriter in this case alludes to the wordplay that people involuntarily make when they think of a person. However, the meaning of the name *Bihter* in Turkish culture refers to “the most beautiful” or “the best” person. By analogy, our character is associated with a dish, which is desired to “be the best”.

Transnational adaptations are complex products that aim to localize a visual story in a new cultural context. The construction of characters from the perspective of names must be done meticulously so that the characters’ traits are in line with their behavior, psychological traits and most importantly, they must be distinct in the cultural space in which the action is placed.

## 5. Frequently and Atypical Names in Romanian Adaptations

Tatiana Trebeş (2019, p. 41) draws attention to the fact that in literature, the names of the characters provide “linguistic, stylistic, sociological information and are relevant to the knowledge of the writer’s psychic universe”. She argues that the choice of names for the characters is not accidental but is conscious and thus the characters are assigned with a nominal identity. Trebeş’ argument can easily be supported in the cinematographic sphere and television series, where screenwriters take the place of literary writers, and give life to stories by creating characters with special features/characteristics. We notice that in the adaptations of the Turkish series, the Romanian screenwriters mainly use certain names that we find in approximately all four series; for example: Tudor, Achim (as surname), Petru/Petre and Răzvan. Each of those names are emblematic for Romanian culture and identity and preserve a better connection with our roots.

Tudor is a Romanian name with historical connotation, referring to *Tudor Vladimirescu*<sup>6</sup>. Today, the name Tudor is widespread in Romania and is used more

<sup>4</sup> In the Romanian version *Bihter* is a negative character which came to Snagov to revenge her deceased father. She was born in Mahmudia, in the Dobruja region. Her mother died swallowed by the Danube and her father, was Arman Enver, a Turkish businessman from Istanbul, who had a shop in the Grand Bazaar. Years ago, he was killed by Magda Popa, a Romanian woman who was kept hostage in a brothel, and whose client he was for years.

<sup>5</sup> In Romanian the word “*biftec*” means grilled or pan-roasted beef tenderloin.

<sup>6</sup> Emblematic figure of 19<sup>th</sup> century, Tudor Vladimirescu was the leader of the 1821 Revolution and lord of Wallachia.

frequently as a name rather than a surname. The etymology the name has Greek origins and is a version of "Theodoros" which means "the gift of God". The religious connotations of the name are signaled by the Christian calendars by celebrating various saints and martyrs during the year with this name. In the Romanian cultural space, the name was first attested in official documents around 1800 and refers to Tudor Vladimirescu an emblematic figure at the beginning of the 19th century. He was the leader of the Revolution of 1821 and the ruler of Wallachia.

In two Romanian series, *Fructul Oprit* and *Clanul*, the main characters have the name Tudor. It seems that the path of the characters is closely related to their meaning. Tudor Caragea is "the gift of God", for Sonia, his second wife, received in exchange of the "forbidden fruit". Tudor Achim is the "gift of God" to Luminița, his mother. After the kidnapping of her second child (Pavel), Tudor was priced as the only gift that God let her to have. The strong relationship between mother and son is represented more abstractly within the meaning of the names and their association, *Luminița/ Light* and *Tudor/ Gift of God*. This bound can be easily perceived and understood within the expression: "Light is in God, and God is light". From a religious point of view, we can say that the screenwriter has outlined the character Tudor in detail, through the meaning of the name. Thus, his name plays a role in the context of the story but also in the relationship with the other characters. To understand better, the expression "God is Light" also implies a contrast with "Darkness". In other words, the contrast between the two worlds, in which the main protagonists (Tudor and David, characters in the series *Clanul*) are located, are emphasized. The reflection of good ("light") and evil ("darkness") is perceived at a mental level through the very analogy of the names deliberately made by the screenwriter in building the characters and the entire adapted story.

Another frequently used name in the series adaptations is Achim. Achim is a Romanian name with biblical meaning, representing the short form the name Joachim/Ioachim. The name has Hebrew origin and means "he whom God has set up" or "the one whom the Lord chosen". Achim or Joachim in the Orthodox Christian religion is the father of the Virgin Mary. In Romania nowadays, this name is less often found as (a baptism) name, however, it is more frequently used as a surname. As found in the Romanian series *Adela* and *Clanul*, the name Achim is used specifically as a surname for the series protagonists. In correlation with the biblical meaning of the name, the family's destiny is already "chosen by God", and their paths and evolution are as it is meant to be. The name Petru or Petre entered Romania through the religious and historical sphere. Petru is one of the apostles of Jesus and is an important figure in the Orthodox Christian religion. The meaning of the name is "stone". From a historical point of view, throughout time, many Romanian rulers had this name<sup>7</sup>. In the series *Fructul Oprit* and *Vlad*, the names Petru and Petre are emblematic for the characters. Even though we talk about two separate series, the configuration of characters according to their name is similar. They both have strong personalities and as stones withstood the test of time.

The appearance of the name Răzvan in the sphere of Romanian anthroponymy emerged through historical and literary influence. Historical sources mention the name

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<sup>7</sup> Petru Rares, Petru Musat, Petru cel Mare etc.

for the first time in the 16th century, as a reference to the short reign of Ștefan Răzvan in the Principality of Moldavia. And as a literary source, the name is found in the work of B.P. Hașdeu, "Răzvan and Vidra"<sup>8</sup>. Both for the series *Vlad* and *Adela*, the name Razvan is used for children. In the series *Adela*, Razvan is the son of the main character Adela (and is portrayed as a baby) and in the *Vlad* series, Razvan is Adrian's/Vlad's little brother that has a strong path during the entire series. He grows up and becomes a journalist to prove his brother's innocence. At the linguistic level, the meaning of the name Răzvan in the Slavic religious context is "the calling" or "the one who spreads the good news". Indeed, the screenwriter shed light on the fact that children are innocent beings and their arrival into the world and their presence in our lives constitute good news. The analogy between the names chosen for the two children is emblematic. Interpreted contextually, the path that Răzvan takes in the series *Vlad*, from childhood to adulthood when he becomes a journalist, is the basis of his mission to "bring the good news", namely that his brother is innocent.

Atypic names such as Șlibovița are also used in the series. Șlibovița is the name of a Roma ethnic women, in the series *Fructul Oprit*. Her name, Șliboviță is the name of an alcoholic drink<sup>9</sup>, which is a fruity brandy made from plumps. Roma people tend to give atypical names to their children depending on the moments they are going through in life, major events, celebrities such as famous actors or singers, names of characters from various films or soap operas, and so on (Felecan, 2011). In the case of this character, the name emphasizes her ethnic identity and at the same time predisposes her to discrimination due to the association with an alcoholic beverage.

## 6. Conclusion

Names used in transnational adaptation of Turkish TV series into Romanian context are not simply symbols of characters, but they represent a complex process of defining cultural and identity values. The development of the script and the meticulous construction of the characters bring to the forefront the issue of naming. The characters are not named randomly. They have names that clearly show us their roots in local tradition and culture and at the same time provide us with data about their individual evolution, social status and even destiny.

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<sup>8</sup> Romantic drama written in 1867. It is inspired by history, from the life of the ruler of Moldova Principality, Ștefan Răzvan.

<sup>9</sup> The drink is specific to the Eastern Europe region, where it is known as *rakia* in the Balkans and *palinka* for the Central European countries.

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