

The Enduring Relevance of Emine Sevgi Özdamar

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Abstract

A major focus of my long-standing engagement with Emine Sevgi Özdamar's writing is the enduring relevance of her work, when that of her contemporary Turkish-German and many other German writers of non-German origin has more or less faded into the shadows of cultural amnesia. While a certain language exoticism of her writing accounts for Özdamar's initial reception as an inventive and original writer, the staying power of her work rests on its ability to reflect on and incorporate novel directions, vistas, and cultural developments. In its various stages of transit from travail to translation, her literary output has traversed through various idioms, generic fields, borders, and sites of multiply centered memories. In the following, I trace the routes of her writing in separate yet dialogically related forms: the novel as uncensored (auto)biography; short story as city portrait; and theater as counter play to political power games. However, beyond and above Özdamar's facility in mixed genres and languages, it is the interlinkages of her work with the concerns of other bi- and multilingual and transported and "translated" writers that transform it into an emblem of our globally peripatetic cultures.

Key Words: transnational literature, (auto)biography, translation, city literature, Karagöz shadow play

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Davetli yazı.

Emine Sevgi Özdamar'ın Devam Eden Geçerliliği

Öz

Emine Sevgi Özdamar'ın yazınına yönelik uzun soluklu ilgimin odak noktalarından biri, diğer çağdaş Türk-Alman ve Alman kökenli olmayan birçok Alman yazarın kültürel hafıza gölgesinde kaybolmalarına karşın, Özdamar'ın eserlerinin hemen hemen otuz senedir güncelliklerini korumuş olmaları. Almanya'da yayımlanan ilk yazılarında algılanan dil egzotizmi onun yaratıcı ve özgün bir yazar olarak kabul edilmesine neden olduysa da yazınının devam etme gücü yazarın yeni kültür coğrafyalarına açık olmasında ve bunların sentezinde yatar. Emekten edebiyata ve de en geniş anlamıyla kültürel çeviriye giden çeşitli aşamalarda yazarın edebi ürünleri değişik kültürel deyimler, sınırlar ve hafıza arşivlerinden yararlandı. Bu makalede Özdamar'ın üç türde geliştirdiği kavramları inceliyorum: sansüre dayanıklı otobiyografi ve biyografi; kent portresi olarak kısa hikâye; ve politik güç oyunlarına karşı oyun olarak tiyatro. Ayrıca Özdamar'ın karma türler ve dillerdeki etkinliğinin ötesinde çalışmalarını onu dünyamızın göçmen kültürlerinin sembolü olan diğer iki ve çok dilli, gezginci, sürgünde, vatansız ve "çevrilmiş" yazarların kaygılarıyla birleştiriyor.

Anahtar Kelimeler: uluslararası edebiyat, (oto)biyografi, çeviri, kent edebiyatı, Karagöz gölge oyunu

The inspiration for my long standing engagement with Özdamar's writing has all along been guided by the following questions: how has her work endured for more than three decades, when that of her contemporary Turkish-German writers, such as Alev Tekinay and Aysel Özakin has more or less faded into the shadows of cultural amnesia? Related to this question is the prescience factor, that is, which features of her work gained more critical edge, as debates on cross-cultural and bilingual writing, world literature/s, and transnational literature increasingly gained center stage in literary criticism and theory? And why has her work, mostly available in Turkish translation, rarely been the subject of interest among the Turkish literati, when she is the subject of numerous dissertations, anthologies, and critical volumes in both German and English, and her books continue to be required reading on courses on transnational litera-

tures? This special issue of *Monograf* on Özdamar has certainly alleviated my concern about the relative obscurity of Özdamar's name among Turkish readers, and I am grateful for the opportunity to briefly discuss the genesis and the development of my work on this *genial* (in both of its meanings: that is, in English as gracious and convivial; and in German as ingenious, inventive) writer.

Let me start at the beginning, although as a philosophical concept beginning has variable lexical connotations. I refer here to Edward Said's (1985) premise in his *Beginnings*, where this concept defines scholarship as establishing the unity of theory and practice and imagination and action. I came across Özdamar's early collection of stories *Mutterzunge* (1990) (*Mother Tongue*),¹ as I was completing my first book on the critical legacy of early German Romantics, among them Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg) and Friedrich Schlegel, who are credited with establishing literary criticism as a discipline. Besides theorizing Romanticism, these genial minds stressed the importance of self-reflexivity in all areas of criticism, including philosophy, religion, history, music, performative arts, and politics and science. Their pathbreaking critical work on language, translation, dreams and the subconscious, as well as memory, made what came afterwards, modernism and the avant-garde, appear *déjà vu*. Having been trained in this critical discourse, I found what I saw as the literal realization of Romanticism's critical insights in Özdamar's stunning use of a *performing* language. I shall return to this observation momentarily. However, first I propose to stake out the geography of Özdamar's bilingual and culturally variegated work on a world literary map.

Although Özdamar's work is positioned mostly between two linguistic milieus, literary traditions, and cultural discourses, it has steadfastly aspired to the ranks of transnational as well as worldly literature, for it shifted the Greenwich meridian on Pascale Casanova's map.² (2007) In other words, it has emerged on a transnational

¹ Translated into Turkish as *Annedili* (2013).

² In her *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova draws a baseline, a literary analogue to the Greenwich meridian, from which the novelty and modernity of the world letters can be measured.

stage, neither originating in a literary metropolis (Paris), nor settling within its habitus. Rather Özdamar's oeuvre resonates with writers and readers of narratives that constitute the epic of our age, that of the iconic migrant, an epic that is inscribed in national borders, remapped territories, and displaced homes. This transnational epic is necessarily framed in translation in the broadest sense, linguistically, culturally, mnemonically, and performatively. Both in text and in performance, Özdamar's work catches this *Zeitgeist*, the spirit of transnational expression, as it comes in conversation with discourses of translation, un/translatability, silence, censorship, and writing against censorship across borders.

While the transnational literary brand of her writing accounts for Özdamar's initial reception as an inventive and original writer, the enduring relevance of her work rests on its ability to reflect on and incorporate novel directions, vistas, and cultural developments. In its various stages of transit from travail to translation, her literary output has traversed through various idioms, generic fields, borders, and sites of multiply centered memories. In the following, I trace the routes of her writing in separate yet dialogically related forms: the novel as uncensored (auto)biography; short story as city portrait, and theater as counter play to political power games. However, beyond and above Özdamar's facility in mixed genres and languages, it is the interlinkages of her work with the concerns of other bi- and multilingual and transported and "translated" writers that transform it into an emblem of our globally peripatetic cultures.

In her self-declaredly favorite novel, *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei – hat zwei Türen – aus einer kam ich rein – aus der anderen ging ich raus* (1992) (translated as *Life is a Caravanserai – Has Two Doors – I Came in One – I Went out the Other*)³ Özdamar tells the creatively self-censored history of an earlier regime of repression (1950-1960), the decade long rule of the *Demokrat Partisi*, which she witnessed as a child and a preteen in fragmented experiences of her family through time and place, specifically in many towns where her father found temporary employment. In *Karawanserei*, she reconfig-

³ Also translated into Turkish as *Hayat Bir Kervansaray* (1993).

ures these shards of memory in a narrative supplanted by myth, superstition, and rumor. The first instance of “translation” or transport in the book is from the memories of her mother tongue; the second translation takes the form of a renarration, which, cloaked in folkloristic wisdom and accented with echoes of *A Thousand and One Nights*, resists any external censorial intervention, despite the fact that between the lines, the writer was bitterly criticizing the existing regime that had begun exploiting religion for political gain.

Since writers of the transnational creed are by choice or circumstance peripatetic, they consider an affiliation with nation or tribe a restriction on their choice of language and cultural habitus. The metropolitan city, whether New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, or Istanbul, where capital and transnational movements are spatially concentrated and citizenship is not one of state but of the city itself, has become the preferred destination of moving populations in search of refuge and/or opportunity. Moving in and out of Istanbul as well as Berlin, Özdamar finally identifies Berlin as her artistic space and home, which emerges in her later work not only as its inspiration but also as a self-generating signifier that drives the narrative.

In one of her stories about Berlin, Özdamar (1990) famously remarks, “In der Fremdsprache haben Wörter keine Kindheit.”⁴ (p.42) (However, it is in German, her foreign language, that she remembers the stories of her childhood, which intersect with Turkey’s embattled first experiment with democracy. Özdamar’s status as a German resident of non-German origin exemplifies the impossibility of classifying people, who have left their homelands, in any clear-cut category. She came to Germany in the mid 60’s as a temporary worker, then became a permanent resident and thus, naturally, part of the existent Turkish minority. However, as a multilingual Berliner author, playwright, and actress, who has performed at Brecht’s *Berliner Ensemble* and the *Comédie Française* in Paris, attended international academic conferences dedicated to her work, and given workshops as writer-in-residence at American universities, she is also undoubtedly a citizen of the world and a cosmopolite.

⁴ (“In the foreign language, words have no childhood”). “Grossvaterzunge” in *Mutterzunge*.

For this Turkish-German writer, Berlin's cityscape, which is not simply an agglomerate of asphalt and concrete, and parks and monuments, but a palimpsest of images of Istanbul and Berlin, forms the backdrop for the diasporan's confrontation with the past and the lost home. Her fascination with the memories of both cities finds its expression in tales of her frequent visits to sites of remembrance—mosques, churches, libraries, ruins of former East Berlin, and, most significantly, cemeteries.

Özdamar (2001) has described Istanbul's cemeteries as the only peaceful sites in the city, since the Turks are not in the habit of making cemetery visits — „Die Friedhöfe sind leer, es sind die einzigen ruhigen Orte in der Stadt”⁵ (p.72) — and the stillness of the dead amidst the green of the cypress trees provides a space for reflection and the connection to departed and beloved lives. The Arabic inscriptions on the gravestones have always fascinated Özdamar, as she makes clear in the story “Großvaterzunge,” (1990) where she expresses her lament for the loss of the Arabic script with the conversion of the Turkish alphabet to the Roman one. In the story, “Mein Berlin” in *Der Hof im Spiegel* (2001), she tells of her frequent visits to Berlin's cemeteries that remind her of Istanbul. In Berlin, the communication she seeks is not with departed family members as in Istanbul, but with members of what she sees as her literary and intellectual family, Hegel, Heinrich Mann, and, most significantly, Bertolt Brecht. In a telling episode, during one of her visits to Brecht's grave, memories of her family and Istanbul overlap with the present moment, as she recalls how her grandmother always planted the same flowers “KÜPELİ” (capital letters in the original; literally translated into German as “mit Ohringen”⁶) that now cover Brecht's resting place. (2001, p.60) In the story, “Mein Istanbul” in the same collection, she tells of visiting an Istanbul cemetery as a young girl with a poet, who was copying down the inscriptions on the gravestones to use in his poems. „Das sind die letzten Sätze der Menschen,” he

⁵ (“The cemeteries are empty; they are the only quiet places in the city”). “Mein Istanbul” in *Der Hof im Spiegel*.

⁶ (“With earrings”). “Mein Berlin” in *Der Hof im Spiegel*. “Küpelı” is fuchsia.

asserts, „Da gibt es keine Lügen.“⁷ (2001, p.72) At Brecht's grave, she marks the words that are inscribed on the headstone, „Er hat Vorschläge gemacht, und sie wurden angenommen.“⁸ (p.60) Later she dreams of visiting Brecht's house, where he is lying on his bed and tells his wife, the renowned actress Helene Weigel, that she wants to speak with him. Weigel tells her he is dead. Özdamar insists that he is not dead, just sleeping, and asks his wife to give her something of his, a tie or a pillow cover, and Weigel gives her his pillow cover.

In the same dream, she is suddenly transported to a ship and sees Turkish fascists following her, „Hinter mir standen Faschisten aus der Türkei.“⁹ (p.61) Here the memories/dreams of her life at Brecht's *Berliner Ensemble* in East Berlin converge with those of her persecution by the Turkish police, whose brutality matches the barbarity of the German police. As she rides through the streets of Berlin, she reads the screaming graffiti on the walls, „Gott ist tot, die Henker nicht... Wir brauchen keinen Tränengas, wir haben genug Grund zum Heulen“ and a resounding plea for remembering the forgotten victims of police violence, „Alles Vergessene schreit im Traum um Hilfe.“¹⁰ (p.58) Thus, by superimposing images/stories of Istanbul's geography and memories on Berlin's backdrop in *Der Hof im Spiegel*, Özdamar engages in a cross-cultural memory work and creates an interpretive model for understanding the algorithm of diaspora in the tale of two cities. In the memory sites of cityscapes, Özdamar sees a repeated performance of trauma; at the same time this rehearsal of distress intensifies rather than diminishes her empathy for the affected. Arguably, it is in its linked concepts of empathy and performance that Özdamar's work succeeds and underlines the importance of her theatrical training as dramaturge, actress, and director.

While performance studies continues, in Martin Puchner's (2006) astute observation, “to be interested in many forms of theater—most often nontraditional, ritual theater— as a discipline it often

⁷ (“These are the last words of the people... there are no lies”). “Mein Istanbul”

⁸ (“He made suggestions, and they were taken”). “Mein Berlin”.

⁹ (“Behind me stood Turkish fascists”).

¹⁰ (“God is dead, the executioners are not... We don't need tear gas, we have enough reason to howl... All that is forgotten cries for help in dreams.”).

distances itself from theater as its central or constitutive object of analysis... Descriptions of performance studies tend toward an additive model,” as the field shares its modes of analysis with many disciplines, anthropology, sociology, philosophy, media studies, technology, even economics. How can we view a disciplinary limit, which “relies on the presumption of performance itself?” (p.50) Özdamar maintains this tension between performativity and theater on stage as well as in text —mostly in the form of storytelling— thereby acknowledging another generic border. However, it is the fluency of these borders, whether linguistic, cultural, or imagistic which lend her work the edge it has enjoyed for so long.

At the time of its staging in 1986 at the Schauspielhaus Frankfurt, Özdamar’s bilingually titled stage play, *Karagöz in Alamania/Schwarzauge in Deutschland*, literally burst on the stage as “excitable speech,” to use an expression of Judith Butler’s (1997). In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Butler argues that linguistic meaning is provisional, slippery, and fluid. The speaker cannot fully control a listener’s interpretation, because not only the speaker and the auditor, but also the context of speech and listening and the words are implicit and complicit in the larger sociocultural context. The provisionality of the speaker’s words in performance or in the speech act can paradoxically also be the source of its power, as the rules of speech acts are tenuous and can be negotiable both in legal matters and more ordinary situations. On this shifting ground, speakers can neither control nor determine with certainty the audiences’ interpretation of their utterance.

Hearing Özdamar’s language through Butler’s idiom, we perceive it as both excitable and exciting. It is excitable or provocative, because it is an eloquent rebuttal to institutionally sustained discourses on German multiculturalism and exciting, because it is structured and stylized in such a manner as to designate various social personae among its readers and viewers as interlocutors, thereby contesting the clichéd notion of the minority author. Furthermore, by vacillating between opacity and transparency, Özdamar’s speech comments on the gray zone of translational acts. The *Karagöz* in the title *Karagöz in Alamania* does not inform the reader/spectator

about the word's meaning, thereby underlining an intentional strategy of untranslatability. And *Alamanya* is a non-standard version of the standard Istanbul Turkish *Almanya* (Germany). This subterfuge into a zone of untranslatability becomes a trope in Özdamar's writing, which not only subverts a certain historical *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of reader expectation), but also underscores how translational games simultaneously confound yet reveal something hidden in both the original and the target language. This subterfuge and revelation prove to be a censorship defying strategy in literature, in general, and literatures produced in conditions of exile, in particular.

German and American scholarship has positioned Özdamar's work to a great extent in the German literary/theatrical archive and underlined its engagement with the trauma of the German past with only a fleeting nod to Turkish history. The influence of Brechtian dramatic traditions and their philosophical underpinnings in her work have duly been noted by critics. The philosopher who rewrote philosophy as theater and had quite a legion of followers, including Brecht, was Friedrich Nietzsche. (Puchner, 2006, p.42) The theatrical core of Nietzsche's oeuvre rests not only on fictional characters across the East-West divide, such as Dionysus, Apollo, and Zarathustra, but also on his insistence that theatricality —masks, dissimulation, play— is the possibility of the condition of reality. "Theatricalization here is in the service of an antiessentialist and antifoundational program." (Puchner, 2006) Metaphors of play and theater are reflected not only in the work of postmodern philosophers, such as Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-François Lyotard but also inhabit pre-Nietzschean philosophy from Hegel through Kierkegaard to Marx. (Puchner, 2006) But it is in Brecht that Nietzsche's masks, on the one hand, and fictive Oriental characters, Shen-Te, Shui-Ta, Azdak, Georgi Abashvili, Okichi (in the incomplete *Die Judith von Shimo-da*), on the other, are embodied on the stage.

While Özdamar's connection to the dramatic personae of German theater figures prominently in German and American scholarship, the presence of Turkish and Middle Eastern forms of nontraditional theater in her work has gone largely unnoticed. The character Karagöz is the protagonist of the traditional Ottoman-Turkish shadow

play.¹¹ In *Karagöz in Alamania/Schwarzauge in Deutschland*, Özdamar borrows the figure of Karagöz from this shadow play, where a cast of characters from the diverse ethnic populations of the Ottoman Empire spar in different idioms and exchange double entendres to comic effect. In Özdamar's play, Karagöz is a migrant worker and crosses the border into Germany with his talking donkey who smokes Camel cigarettes and lectures on Marxism. The play's motley crew speaks in different tongues, switching and transferring codes. The object of Özdamar's relentless parody in *Karagöz* is capitalism's exploitation of human labor and resources. The indentured laborers are not only alienated from their work in the Marxist sense, but also from their origins, languages, and families. The play proceeds to the tempo of an uncanny tango between various borders. Through this simultaneously macabre and humorous play, Özdamar shows how regimes of power can be rattled in linguistic space by disrupting dominant idioms.

In a similar vein, the late Puerto Rican-American writer Rosario Ferré (1991) sees in the free play of words, a defiance of social meanings and structures of power.¹² This linguistic space of free play, of translational subterfuge—which favors no native speaker but rather signals empathy for those outside the comfort zone of their own language—is where Özdamar meets other masters of linguistic “cross-fertilization,” such as Ferré, the German-Japanese author Yoko Tawada, Chinese-American Maxine Hong Kingston, and other writers writing/riding on the hyphen from spaces without access to the literary Greenwich meridian to spaces beyond the national. While their writing has emerged in specific temporal and geographical spaces, it has expanded to take into its purview issues that transcend terrestrial borders, such as the relation of history and memory, existential crises of identity, loss and melancholy, and persecution and censorship that drive writers to exile.

¹¹ It should be noted that Özdamar's attraction to the figure of Karagöz ties in with Brecht's interest in East Asian theater, including shadow puppetry, which had originated in the Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD) and continued to grow in popularity in China (Song and Ming dynasties). It was transported to Persia and the Ottoman Empire by the (conquering) Mongols.

¹² See Ferré, “On Destiny, Language, and Translation; or, Ophelia Adrift in the C. & O. Canal.”

It is arguably in the many intersections of Özdamar's work with that of the increasing number of border crossing, self-translating, hyphenated writers —German-Russian, Francophone, Cuban-American, Korean-American,¹³ among many others— and post/modernist writers writing at home that the enduring power of her art lies. Like other prominent transnational writers, Özdamar invokes real and fictional characters as well as actual and invented events from the historical-cultural archive and repurposes these for political and ethical ends. Many critics have surprisingly overlooked the symbolism in the employment of the Karagöz figure, which references the historical significance of this Ottoman-Turkish performance art. Performed by linguistically gifted puppeteers, who could do several accents, Greek, Armenian, Arab, Syriac, Laz, Albanian, Sinti, representative of the multilinguistic and multiethnic fabric of the Ottoman state, the Karagöz shadow play was also a shield against political persecution, since there was no fixed script, and the puppeteer could take on the imperial palace and its politics in both hilarious and serious ways in different social registers of speech, for which the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975) used the term *heteroglossia*. The two characters in the play Karagöz and Hacivat represent different social classes; Karagöz is a street-smart master of double entendre and Hacivat, a pretentious snob, who is constantly ridiculed by Karagöz's word plays. This performance, based on word play, double entendre, and improvisation was a censor resistant art form that subtly yet sharply criticized the ruling regime. While Özdamar's play has a script, its social critique stays close to the spirit of the shadow play *Karagöz*. Both the traditional play and Özdamar's "adaptation" generate empathy in the viewer for characters on the stage by transcending differences in language, race, gender, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and religion.

Empathetic scripting and reading/viewing translate otherness and make it familiar. Much recent research, particularly by the phi-

¹³ Vladimir Kaminer is a popular Russian-born writer writing in German and living in Germany; among numerous Francophone writers are Yasmin Khadra, Amin Maalouf, and the late Assia Djebar whose works, written in French, are readily available in English; the late Oscar Hijuelos (Cuban-American) was a Pulitzer prize winner and a prolific writer; Chang-rae Lee is among the most renowned Korean-American writers.

losopher Martha Nussbaum and the Harvard Psychology professor Steven Pinker, has focused on the role of literature in engendering empathy, compassion, and sense of social justice in the reader. However, the importance of theater in awakening empathy in the viewer has received little critical attention. It goes without saying that a theater of cross-cultural or transcultural orientation and imagination sets the stage for either strong identification with the pain of “the others” or empathy and understanding for them.

Circling back to one of the questions at the onset of this essay, I maintain that while the linguistic innovations Özdamar has introduced into German through her ingenious translations of Turkish infuses her German with a picture-like quality, the endurance of her work rests on issues that have a larger appeal beyond linguistic exoticism. Her hi/stories preserve and reveal banned chapters of modern Turkish history, put Turkish and German pasts into an open dialogue, and retell suppressed or forgotten tales that help decipher the apparently inscrutable signs of other cultures.

Özdamar along with her fellow writers in diaspora raises questions that lie at the heart of border crossing tales: What is the relation of the migrant writer to the homeland left behind and to the mother tongue? How do bi- and multilingualism affect the language of writing? What does it mean that a text, though directly written in a given language is already translated? How is the memory of the mother tongue preserved, compromised, or enhanced in “translation”? As various forms of migrant experience —intellectual, academic, economic, sociopolitical— impinge on historically rooted and orthodox lives and communities, the work of visionary writers like Özdamar communicates to readers the empathetic solidarity with those affected by the radical dislocations of our time.

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