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Early Migrant Writers of Turkish Origin in “Acı Vatan”

Literary standards? Yes, of course. Because literature is not automatically good just because a foreign author has written it, and at the same time, literature is not bad just because a German author has written it. One does the non-German authors no favors, when the quality of their literature is determined solely by their personal biography, above all, when that biography is automatically tied to ideas of imprisonment in "the home" or exile in "the foreign."

— Thomas Bleicher, *Literatur der Migration*

Eine nicht nur deutsche Literatur¹

It was the mid-1980s, as it is generally considered, when a new genre of literature, called by various names, emerged in Germany. Migrant literature does not necessarily refer to the literature of or about migration, but the literature produced by migrants or their offsprings. It is highly debated, however, if a person of migrant parents who is born within the borders of a certain country can be called a “(second-generation) migrant” or if they are just denizens.² In *Literatur der Fremde - Literatur in der Fremde*, Sigrid Weigel (1992) finds it no surprising “that the concept of multiculturalism began to attract serious attention in Germany at about the same time that the unique literature of foreign authors began to be published in German”. Ever since its emergence, the migrant literature has been under serious discussion regarding not only its aesthetic qualities, but also the literature as a genre itself. The terms *Migrantenliteratur* (migrant literature) and

¹ “Not just German literature”, a concept developed at Bad Homburg conference on “German Literature by Non-Native Authors”.

² While acknowledging the discussions over the terminology and briefly presenting them here, I shall stick to the term “migrant literature” to refer to the discussed phenomenon in the paper. The main reason here is that the four writers who will be discussed in the paper are indeed migrants themselves.

Ausländerliteratur (foreign literature) are criticized because they are too general to describe the relevant phenomenon in Germany. *Gastarbeiterliteratur* (guest worker literature), on the other hand, is too specific and may carry negative connotations for some. Franco Biondi and Rafik Schami (1981), in their article *Literatur der Betroffenheit* ("Literature of the Affected"), use the term *Gastarbeiterliteratur* in an ironic sense. "We are deliberately using the term *Gastarbeiter* applied to us, in order to expose the irony this term conceals". Initially, the literature produced by migrants in German, or bilingually, basically described the workers' painful experiences in *Fremde*, their problems regarding their job and at home, and of course, their *sıla hasreti*. It did not, however, analyze their situation. The migrant literature is not restricted to the experiences of guest workers, of course. There is much more beyond that, as we can see in Akif Pirinçci's works, for instance.

The literature produced by migrants of Turkish origin in Germany is a quite rich field to study. Aras Ören, Yüksel Pazarkaya, Güney Dal, Emine Sevgi Özdamar, Zehra Çırak, Feridun Zaimoğlu, Zafer Şenocak, Akif Pirinçci, Alev Tekinay, İsmet Elçi, Selim Özdoğan, Yadé Kara, *et al.* are all writers that have contributed a lot to the German-language literature. The writers to be presented in this paper are Yüksel Pazarkaya, Akif Pirinçci, Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Aras Ören.³ The writers and some of their works shall be introduced especially with regards to their views on identity or their standpoint as a migrant. Two of the writers, Aras Ören and Yılmaz Pazarkarkaya, are considered to be the first to write in this genre. The other two of the writers, Aras Ören and Emine Sevgi

³ These four have been picked due to their role in the emergence of this genre and/or great popularity as writers. This certainly does not mean that others are of less significance, but the limitation to four writers is largely due to limited space. Otherwise each writer would have to be restricted to short descriptions with no or very little detail.

Özdamar, have received the prestigious award Adelbert von Chamisso Prize. It is annually given to writers of foreign origin in Germany. Chamisso, born Louis Charles Adélaïde de Chamissot, was a German-language poet of French origin. It is no wonder, then, why the migrant writers in Germany are sometimes called “Chamisso’s Grandchildren”.

Yüksel Pazarkaya: A Cultural Synthesis

Yüksel Pazarkaya, seeing himself as a cultural mediator, is one of the first authors to contribute to the emergence of migrant literature. Migrated to Germany for studies in 1958, he graduated from Stuttgart University with a bachelor degree in chemistry. He received his master’s degree in philosophy and *Germanistik* at the same university. His love for German language is expressed in his poem *deutsche sprache*, "which I love unconditionally / which is my second home." In his short article, *Vom Kulturschock zur Kultursynthese*, Pazarkaya explains his idea of cultural synthesis, which Heidrun Suhr finds ambiguous:

Yet we must recall that most of his countrymen were recruited in rural areas of Turkey to work in the Federal Republic. [...] A survey carried out in 1980 showed that 29.5% of Turkish workers stated that they had no knowledge of German. [...] Pazarkaya's idea of a cultural synthesis becomes even more vague [sic] when these facts are considered. He admits that "what is necessary is not only a profound knowledge of both cultures, but also a kind of incarnation into German culture, history, and contemporary life," and adds that all those who think in global terms and believe in the unifying concepts of "human history" (*Menschheitsgeschichte*) and "human culture" (*Menschheitskultur*) can expect this synthesis. As a "citizen of the world" (*Weltbürger*), Pazarkaya exclaims: "I feel at home when people forget my country of origin" (Suhr 1989)

In 1977, the Turkish writer Füzuan published a report based on her observations of Turkish guest workers which she got to know during her year as a writer-in-residence with a DAAD scholarship in Berlin. Her report was viciously attacked by Pazarkaya calling her “grossly ignorant” of German culture, which he identifies himself with. Füzuan had actually interviewed a diverse group of Turkish persons, which also included the miners in the Ruhr district, and what is more, she wrote about their lives long before Günter Wallraff⁴ did, as Suhr (1989) points out. This fact does not stop Pazarkaya from attacking Füzuan, however. He goes even further to say about her, “[A] misanthropic lack of charity unmasks the author's nature and intention.” In that article, *Stimmen des Zorns und der Einsamkeit in Bitterland*, Pazarkaya criticizes Bekir Yıldız in the same way as well, where he also claims to be the “pioneer” of *Gastarbeiterliteratur* – this is not incorrect. He has also translated many significant literary works into German, most notably Orhan Veli, Nazım Hikmet and Aziz Nesin. He also notes that “other writers of note were only occasional ‘visitors’ to Germany and therefore either not intimately knowledgeable of the lives of the Turkish workers or so ideologically biased as to present distortions of another kind”. In his first book, *Rosen im Frost*, published in 1982, Pazarkaya writes in the introduction, “If the German population had been adequately informed, say, about Turkish culture and intellectual history, about Turkish society, anti-Turkish sentiments would have found a less fertile breeding ground.” In this respect, Pazarkaya co-edited a book with Karl-Heinz Meier-Braun to provide Germans with more information about Turkey and Turks. In fact, Pazarkaya has written extensively on this topic in the book, *Die Türken: Berichte und Informationen zum*

⁴ Wallraff is known for his book *Ganz unten* (“Lowest of the Low”), where he writes about his experience as a “Turkish guest worker”, which he posed himself as to find out the mistreatment received by the employers and the government.

besseren Verständnis der Türken in Deutschland. As to his own identity, Pazarkaya writes the following in his article, *The Meaning of Four Books: On the Variability of Culture*, which is available in English:

Back then I was a Turkish lad. Today I am certain that Turkish is the designation for a biochemical and psychosociocultural relation. In this I am Ionian, Lydian, Trojan - yes, particularly Trojan. Further, I am, via this relation, Lycian and Hittite, Byzantine, Selchuk and Ottoman, shaman, Jew, Christian, and Muslim; sometimes citizen, sometimes anarchist; sometimes bohemian, sometimes ascetic.

Akif Pirinçi: A Cosmpolitan Culture of Self-Dramatizing Individualism

In "Türkiye, Mutterland - Almanya, Bitterland...: Das Phänomen der türkischen Migration als Thema der Literatur," Yüksel Pazarkaya discusses the change in migrant literature and gives Akif Pirinçi as an example. He notes that Pirinçi deals with issues that are consciously placed outside the *topos* of migration: their interest lies "ganz bewußt außerhalb der Migrationsthematik" (Bayer 2004). Indeed, Pirinçi, who immigrated to Germany together with his parents in 1969, has published works of literature which can not be easily placed under the category *Migrantenliteratur*. The first book he published in 1980 is basically a teenage love story, *Tränen sind immer das Ende* ("It Always Ends in Tears"). In the book, he "composes a postethnic, cosmopolitan narrative that resists ethnicization or radicalization through declarations and demonstrations of belonging to the culture where one is settled and denials of all interest in the culture of origin." (Cheesman 2007) Pirinçi's book is not based on migrant experience, dislocation or conflict. Throughout the book, the protagonist is frequently presented as Turkish, but it never becomes a theme. It is as if he just happens to have Turkish parents, with whom he

does not seem to get along very well. As Cheesman (2007) points out, "Pirinçci created the first Turkish voice in German literature that declared itself free of the burden of minority representation." The protagonist, Akif with no surname given, introduces himself to Christa, the girl he falls in love with, with the following words:

I came to Germany ten years ago with my parents and sister. And it's not funny when after so long a time you're still constantly facing: "you-can-speak-good-German." Basically I don't feel in the slightest that I'm a Turk, but nor am I a German. I'm not even floating in the middle. Probably I'm nothing at all. (Yes, that's it!) (8-9)

After he is dumped by her beloved, the protagonist attempts suicide in order to write a novel, which is the novel itself. Pirinçci is also the writer of a well-known book series. *Felidae*, published in 1989, is a crime fiction novel where cats are presented as the main protagonists. It quickly caught on; and facing great popularity, Pirinçci expanded his concept of "cat crime fiction" by publishing several sequels to *Felidae*. His last book *Schandtat Felidae VI* was published in 2007.

Emine Sevgi Özdamar: Bridging Two Cultures through Bildungsroman⁵

Initially moving to Germany in 1965, Emine Sevgi Özdamar first worked in a factory, then studied drama in Istanbul, and then went back to Germany to work with Brecht's disciple Benno Besson in Berlin. In 1991, Özdamar won the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize for her book *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Tiiren aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus*. According to Azade Seyhan (1996), one needs understanding of German and Turkish cultures to appreciate the book, a *Bildungsroman*. In *Das Leben*

⁵ Bildungsroman, used to describe Özdamar's book *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei*, is a genre of the novel chronicles the life of the protagonist from his childhood to adulthood, where alteration is of utmost significance.

ist eine Karawanserei, the protagonist is born in Malatya around World War II. She earns a living through acting, and by the end of the book, she leaves the country for Germany, sharing a train compartment with a prostitute and a lesbian. The book “takes the reader into an unfamiliar world and affords him or her the vicarious experience of learning something of its language its customs and its values just as the young central character herself learns them” (Horrocks, et al. 1996). When she came to Germany in 1965, she says in her book *Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn* published in 1998, she could not speak a word of German. In this semi-autobiography and semi-novel, she tells as a factory worker how she learned the language simply by listening to the sounds of works and trying to figure out the newspaper headlines. The book received The Adelbert von Chamisso Prize in 1999 and at the ceremony, Sigrid Löffler said, “Emine Özdamar has immigrated into and settled down in the German language. She has westernised her Turkish mother tongue and orientalised her German, enriching it with Turkish patterns of thought and speech.” In her collection of short stories *Mutterzunge* published in 1990, Özdamar writes about some of her experiences and the language problem in Berlin. “In my language,” says Özdamar, “tongue means language”, and she adds, “A tongue has no bones: twist it in any direction and it will turn that way.”

Aras Ören: The Feasibility of a Multicultural Society

Aras Ören, who went to Germany or drama studies several times before, settled in Germany in 1969. He worked for the Turkish broadcasting at the Berlin Radio until 2002. Ören came to Germany with guest workers, but he was not one of them. Explicitly referring to his background, he sees migrant’s situation as an essential to him. Writing in Turkish, Ören has his works translated into German as well. In his afterword to

Deutschland, ein türkisches Märchen, Ören says he is not for going back to Turkey and finding little Germanies there, while they have already found little Istanbul in Germany. In “Türkiye, Mutterland - Almanya, Bitterland.”, Pazarkaya praises Ören’s works and states they are great contributions to cultural synthesis. His works are usually aesthetic presentations of a functioning multicultural society. In his Berlin-poems, which are actually not really poems in the strict sense of the word but a blend of different forms, inhabitants of one street in Kreuzberg are portrayed in depth. *Was will Niyazi in der Naunynstraße?* (“What’s Niyazi Doing in Naunyn Street?”), *Der kurze Traum aus Kagithane* (“The Fleeting Dream of Kagithane”), and *Die Fremde ist auch ein Haus* (The Foreign Country is A Home Too) form Ören’s Berlin-poems trilogy, revealing an optimistic vision about his views on multiculturalism. Since *Bitte Nix Polizei* (“No Police, Please”) in 1981, however, Ören seems to have lost his hope and optimism. In this book, a detective story, Ören has a constellation of German and Turkish characters that are developed through the plot. The book ends with the suicide of an illegal migrant of Turkish origin, Ali Itir, loses his life, the harsh reality of which bites Brigitte, the daughter of a petite bourgeois family, who had wrongly accused him to the police. The police in the book is an important element:

Police chief Michael Heymann had not counted on even a single lead from the Turks. When the corpses of three Turks were discovered at 25 Naunyn Street two weeks ago, it was the first time he had ever had any- thing to do with foreigners, and he had found that the thoughts and feelings, the silence of these people, confronted him like an insurmountable wall.

Another book, *Manege* (“Arena”) narrates the story of Bekir Ucal, who is lost in his thoughts as he wanders around Kreuzberg, daydreaming about his memories from

Turkey. “Here, Ören describes a phenomenon typical for uprooted people in a foreign country: the habit of daydreaming, the attempt to reconcile the dissonant fragments of two cultural spheres.” (Suhr 1989) Along with Rafik Schami and Ota Filip, Ören became the first winner Adelbert von Chamisso Prize. In his acceptance speech, he emphasized that without those millions of emigrants he would not be the recipient of the prize. Indeed, in one of his poems, “An Imaginary Foreigner Strike in Berlin”, Ören writes:

The industrial sector hangs out a sign:
We need workers! Every idiot welcome.
The man on the street is still screaming:
Ausländer raus! Foreigners out!⁶

Concluding Remarks: Creating a beyond in Fremde

Fremde is one of the most challenging words to translate into English, yet it is bound to be the main or the underlying theme of migrant literature. While the Turkish counterpart may be *gurbet*, no English word suffices to convey that meaning. “Now *Fremde* is more a synonym for separation, hardship, privation, homesickness, and the loss of a sense of belonging. Geographic distance resulting from forced migration causes feelings of isolation and of painful alienation” (Suhr 1987). The migrant writers of Turkish in *Fremde* are a part of the intercultural phenomenon occurring in German-language literature. Please note that the word used here is not German literature, but German-language literature. In his interview with Yasemin Çongar⁷, Günter Grass noted that the label “German literature” is misleading as there are many non-German writers who write in German. The meeting of two or more cultures creates an “in-between” space, a beyond, says the art theorist Homi K. Bhabha. This makes the ideas and meanings that

⁶ The whole poem can be read at <<http://www.einaudi.cornell.edu/europe/outreach/pdf/crossingbridge/day4/An%20Imaginary%20Foreigner%20Strike%20in%20Berlin.pdf>>

⁷ The interview can be found online at <<http://www.taraf.com.tr/yasemin-congar/makale-gunter-grass-roman-bir-fahise-gibidir.htm>>

were normally not possible to be imagined and thought possible in this new non-monocultural atmosphere – hence the uniqueness of the literature produced by migrants. “I am, then, as a German Turk,” says Yüksel Pazarkaya in *The Meaning of Four Books*, “more privileged than Brecht and Hikmet. I am at home in both languages and both traditions. And if openness and transparency are raised consciously to a poetic program, sooner or later they must more or less intensively enter into an indivisible symbiosis.”

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