

# Transcultural movements in contemporary German (-Turkish) literature

Autor(en): **Ezli, Özkan**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie**

Band (Jahr): **62 (2008)**

Heft 4

PDF erstellt am: **26.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-147803>

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# TRANSCULTURAL MOVEMENTS IN CONTEMPORARY GERMAN(-TURKISH) LITERATURE

Özkan Ezli

## *Abstract*

In times of migration and globalization, ascriptions of national or cultural identity are subject to radical changes. Literature is a medium through which these changes can be reflected in a sensitive and complex way. In the case of German-Turkish literature, transcultural movements can be observed in the fundamental modifications literary writing has undergone since its beginnings in the 1960s. While in the 1970s and 1980s literary language in German-Turkish texts served the purpose of representation and mediation through description of the loss of home and the search for national and cultural identity, more recent texts, like those by Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Feridun Zaimoğlu from the 1990s, display a language that questions earlier ascriptions of national and cultural identity in the form of a “joyful defiguration” (R. Barthes), shifts borders and takes German-Turkish literature to a transcultural level. We may, therefore, identify a shift from representation (constructing and constituting national and cultural identities) to problematization of the notions of nation and culture in an affirmative and metalinguistic way. In this, German-Turkish literature follows the complex movements of migration itself.

## From nowhere to literature

The future of French literature is in the hands of North African and Caribbean authors, that of English literature in the hands of Pakistani and Indian authors and the future of German literature in the hands of Turkish authors. This is the argument of Spanish writer and essayist Juan GOYTISOLO in a 1994 review in *Times Literary Supplement* of the autobiographical novel *Life is a carvanserei – Has two doors / I came in one / I went through the other* by the German-Turkish author Emine Sevgi ÖZDAMAR. And he added that the initial amusement of the immigrants’ literature did not last very long: He argued that ÖZDAMAR’s text typifies an important shift within the national literatures from the principle of

nativity towards a new, mobile and migratory logic.<sup>1</sup> There are good reasons to extend GOYTISOLO's argument in order to state that nowadays it is no longer really necessary to be born into a national literature; one can also migrate into it.

Why GOYTISOLO chose Emine Sevgi ÖZDAMAR, who was born 1946 in Anatolia, in order to describe this process was not coincidental: in the same year the English-language translation of ÖZDAMAR's first book was described by *Publishers Weekly* as one of the best foreign books of the year and the *Times Literary Supplement* awarded *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* the honour of being designated "International Book of the Year". What is more, since she was awarded the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize at the beginning of the 1990s, ÖZDAMAR has been among the most successful authors in Germany, along with the inventor of *Kanak-Sprak* Feridun ZAIMOGLU. Yet the German institutes of literature have not always paid such attention to German-Turkish literature. In the middle of the eighties Yüksel PAZARKAYA, one of the Turkish immigrant authors, noticed that foreign artists or authors suffered serious disadvantages.<sup>2</sup>

However, there is a long way from the beginnings of German-Turkish literature by immigrants in the seventies with authors like Aras ÖREN, Nevzat ÜSTÜN and Yüksel PAZARKAYA to the writing of Akif PİRİNÇCI or Alev TEKINAY in the eighties, and then to ÖZDAMAR and ZAIMOGLU in the nineties: there has not only been a change in the attention it receives but also a change in themes and in this literature's notion of itself, which we nowadays must define more as trans-national and trans-cultural.

Within the literature of immigrants in Germany in the seventies and eighties, crucial themes were questions about origin and identity. Themes and complexes of motifs in this "literature of dismay" were: homesickness, coldness, ignorance, conflicts of identity and cultural conflicts. These topics were current until the late eighties. Experiences of inner conflicts and ruptures – as metaphors of the impossibility of a homogeneous cultural identity – are often described as an absolute absence. Neither Turkish nor German, this literature turns to a expression of a void or non-existence or rather an existence as 'nothing' or 'nobody'. "So I am something, but then again nothing", writes Aras Ören in his text *Deutschland, Ein türkisches Wintermärchen* (Germany, a Turkish fairytale).<sup>3</sup>

1 Juan GOYTISOLO, [On Emine Sevgi Özdamar], *Times Literary Supplement* (New York), 2.12.1994:12.

2 In: Irmgard ACKERMANN (ed.), *Türken deutscher Sprache. Berichte, Erzählungen, Gedichte*, München: dtv, 1984:89.

3 "Ich bin / also was / and bin auch wieder nichts." Aras ÖREN, *Deutschland – Ein türkisches Wintermärchen*, Hildesheim: Claassen, 1994:22 (translation mine).

Authors of the second generation remark this notion particularly often: “I’m not even betwixt and between. Really I’m nothing at all”, writes Akif PIRINCI in his novel *Tears are always the end* (published 1980).<sup>4</sup> In other words, one can express the fact that *something* is lost, but it is no longer possible to specify *what exactly* is lost.

“Even in Turkey he can’t find this *something* anymore,” writes another author of the second generation. This whole logic of discourses about an origin that can no longer be specified contrasts with the literature of the nineties and the beginning 21<sup>st</sup> century written by Emine Sevgi ÖZDAMAR and Feridun ZAIMOGLU, who have produced an aesthetics and a consciousness which revaluates the lack of identity and approaches it positively.<sup>5</sup>

### A joyful defiguration

“My German words have no childhood,” Emine Sevgi ÖZDAMAR said in a speech, and it initially seems that this statement belongs to the tradition of the discourse of lack, but she adds: “but my experience with German words is purely bodily”.<sup>6</sup> That is, in spite of the fact that her childhood is not to be found in the German language, her prose work is also autobiographical. Her trilogy, which was written and published between the years 1991 and 2003, tells about her childhood in an Anatolian village, her youth in Istanbul, then her two years as a *Gastarbeiter* in Berlin, and her return to Turkey; after that, she studied drama and at the same time suffered the experience of political oppression (it was 1970, the time of the second *coup d’etat* in Turkey). Finally she went into exile, departing in 1976 to Germany to learn the system of Bertold Brecht’s drama at the *Berliner Ensemble* Theatre in what was then East Berlin, because the verses by Brecht helped her – very much like the words of Arabic prayers – in the very difficult political times in Turkey. These stages are described by her prose work which plays with a fictional form and humorous lust for telling in which Turkish figures of speech crop up, translated into German in her texts; her texts thus cre-

4 “Ich schwanke nicht einmal so in der Mitte. Eigentlich bin ich gar nichts.” Akif PIRINÇCI, *Tränen sind immer das Ende*, München: Goldmann Verlag, 1980:191 (translation mine).

5 See Özkan EZLI, “Von der Identitätskrise zu einer ethnografischen Poetik: Migration in der deutsch-türkischen Literatur”. In: ARNOLD, Heinz Ludwig (ed.), *Literatur und Migration*, München: edition text+kritik, 2006:61–74, p. 63f.

6 Emine Sevgi ÖZDAMAR, *Der Hof im Spiegel*, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001:98.

ate an expression of opportunities in German literature which did not exist before.

In the same way the texts by Feridun ZAIMOGLU like *Kanak-Sprak*, *Ab-schaum* (Scum) and *Koppstoff* enriched the literary discourse in Germany in the middle of the nineties with a new tone and style coming from the margins of society. In these three anthologies of texts the author functions as a *rewriting* documentalist who in his first book, *Kanak-Sprak* (1995), still portrays the life of un-integrated Turkish outsiders in an explosive and rhythmic staccato language, granting their alleged linguistic inability an aesthetic Self. The lack of identity is revalued within language in a technical and aesthetic form. In *Scum* (1997) ZAIMOGLU concentrates on a biography of a single Kanak and finally, with *Koppstoff* (1998), he produces an anthology of texts giving the women of the Kanaks a freely rendered, *nachgedichtete* voice too. To derive biographical details from this book is hardly possible, because these texts do not aim to go into the detail of specific life histories. Rather they highlight glaring points and mark dealings and positions. They are intensive stories whose meaning does not lie in the hermeneutical meaning, but in a rhythmic staccato-like using of language and its performance.

ÖZDAMAR's mostly fictional narration of immigrant biographies in her texts is coupled to an aesthetics different from ZAIMOGLU's, but still she deals with language in a very similar way. She tells the stories episodically like her own biography and does not describe a discourse of identity that focuses on questions of "to be or not to be". In the same way as ZAIMOGLU, she describes fragmental conditions and intensities which highlight the Turkish in the German and the German in the Turkish and lead to transgressing and shifting the borders over and over again.

From its beginning in the seventies until today the development of this literature in Germany has been characterised by specific notions. First came the term *Gastarbeiterliteratur* (the literature of foreign workers), then the "Literature of dismay"; there followed the era of cultural synthesis (*multi-culti*) which was treated exhaustively under the label of intercultural literature and allowed for a dialogue between cultures. These notions are connected above all to the thought that the Other, that is, the other cultural identity, is very clearly located in this literature and that a dialogue can be established with this Other. At the same time, the question of cultural authenticity was also treated. It might be argued that the few texts I have mentioned suit this very simple culturalist approach; however, these cultural identities and problems cannot be located in ZAIMOGLU's and ÖZDAMAR's texts.

For the authors of the first hour, like Yüksel PAZARKAYA and Aras ÖREN, the coupling to the Turkish mother tongue (ana dil) in their literature was not only a question of cultural policy, but also one of identity. However, ÖZDAMAR explains her decision against the Turkish language and for the German language not from the ideological standpoint of identity. She felt very happy as she got her tongue round the German language.

In my language tongue means language.

A tongue has no bones, anywhere you turn it, it turns.

I sat with my turned tongue in this city of Berlin. A nigger café, Arab customers, the stools are too high, feet wobble. An old croissant is sitting tiredly on my plate, I immediately give the waiter a tip, because he shouldn't feel ashamed. If I only knew when I lost my mother tongue. My mother and I once spoke in our mother tongue. My mother said to me: "You know, you speak this way, you think that you are telling everything, but suddenly you leap over unspoken words, then you calmly go on speaking, I leap with you, and then I just take a breath." Then she said: "You've left half of your hair in Alamania." Now I remember sentences of my mother which she spoke in her mother tongue only if I imagine her voice. The sentences themselves sounded to my ears like a foreign language which I'd learned well.<sup>7</sup>

In this passage from ÖZDAMAR's story *Mutterzunge* (Mother Tongue) we come across a multitude of elements which shape this story, but also the whole work of this Turkish-German author. The operation case of language and tongue (body) in German goes beyond the translation out. The tongue (language), which has no bones, the most flexible body of the people, no national or cultural boundaries to use a new language knows. The mother tongue, they still with her mother said, is in memories. However, not more than maternity, but as a foreign language. Thus, between the German and Turkish is not an intercultural or a multicultural,

7 "In meiner Sprache heißt Zunge: Sprache. Zunge hat keine Knochen, wohin man sie dreht, dreht sie sich dorthin. Ich saß mit meiner gedrehten Zunge in dieser Stadt Berlin. Negercafé, Araber zu Gast, die Hocker sind zu Hoch, Füße wackeln. Ein altes Croissant sitzt müde im Teller, ich gebe sofort Bakshish, der Kellner soll sich nicht schämen. Wenn ich nur wüsste, wann ich meine Mutterzunge verloren habe. Ich und meine Mutter sprachen mal in unserer Mutterzunge. Meine Mutter sagte mir: 'Weißt du, du sprichst so, du denkst, dass du alles erzählst, aber plötzlich springst du so über nichtgesagte Wörter, dann erzählst du wieder ruhig, ich springe mit dir mit, dann atme ich ruhig.' Sie sagte dann: 'Du hast die Hälfte deiner Haare in Alamania gelassen.' Ich erinnere mich jetzt an Muttersätze, die sie in ihrer Mutterzunge gesagt hat, nur dann, wenn ich ihre Stimme mir vorstelle, die Sätze selbst kamen in meine Ohren wie eine von mir gut gelernte Fremdsprache." Emine Sevgi ÖZDAMAR, *Mutterzunge – Erzählungen*, Berlin: Rotbuch Verlag, 1990:9 (translation mine).

but a transcultural communication. It is no longer at a linguistic parallel worlds' or an exchange between solid cultural positions, but a complex crossing. The German will be transformed. The question of identity, the problem of their own position is not in the foreground. The "I" in *Mutterzunge* (Mother Tongue) is performative. It operates where something happens. It attracts not come back to from a distance omniscient to arrange and to determine what its own and what the other identity belongs. The differences are moving in and flow into each other. The subject is constituted by emerging experiences. There is a joyful disfigurement, in which the languages penetrate each other and mutually change, in which they glorify in the sense of Roland Barthes, they tear each other to pieces and reconfigure themselves in a new way.<sup>8</sup>

In opposition to a logic of the general, that is, a logic which functions within the context of "large" concepts like identity, origin, being or not-being, what we face in the texts of ÖZDAMAR is a logic of singularity, a narration sparked off by small things like a reminiscence of a word or a sentence spoken by the mother, which shifts in the act of writing, becomes foreign, but at the same time becomes preserved. Almost as in Marcel Proust's work, there are often small objects like a coffeepot or a cigarette, or sounds and voices like the never-ending barking of a dog, which set off stories. ÖZDAMAR's relation to the language is bodily and not representative. "The German words have body for me", she writes in her anthology of stories *Der Hof im Spiegel* (The yard in the mirror).<sup>9</sup>

## Literature as a performative acting

Feridun ZAIMOGLU named his first literary work *Kanak Sprach*, language of the Kanaks. Etymologically, the iridescent notion 'Kanake' refers to New Caledonia. In that cultural context, the term "Kanak" meant originally nothing more than "human" and served the members of the population who lived there to describe themselves. The French colonists, who occupied this group of islands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, took over the notion and used it as a derogatory description of the strange and foreign. From the perspective of the French, Kanaks were not of the same value as themselves, but humans and cannibals at the same time. When the

8 See Ottmar ETTE : *ÜberLebenswissen – Die Aufgabe der Philologie*, Berlin 2004:232–244.

9 "Die deutschen Wörter haben einen Körper für mich." Emine Sevgi ÖZDAMAR, *Der Hof im Spiegel*, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2001:112 (translation mine).

New Caledonians revolted against the French colonialists in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they had recourse to this term of abuse, using it as a political weapon with positive connotations. Today they call their land proudly 'Kanaky'.

In Germany, the notion *Kanake* experienced a similar shift in meaning. Since the eighties it has served as a disparaging indication of mostly Turkish- or Kurdish-origin 'guest workers'; it implies that Kanaks lack standards of hygiene and molest German women in a most obtrusive manner. Above all this notion has often been connected with the immigrants' and their children's lack of language. In Feridun ZAIMOGLU's literary texts of the nineties this lack becomes clearly reevaluated.

I can't bear to hear them speak about young people who lack language abilities. They are simply multi-medial. The youngsters can speak Denglish, they can speak Kanak Sprak, they can speak Video-Clip-German, and they speak a wonderful German.<sup>10</sup>

The young people not only communicate in national languages, they also speak dialect and slang, enrich their language with Anglicisms and make full use of the language of the culture industry. The notion *Kanake* is employed in this literature to express a positive consciousness and this disparaging inflammatory term becomes the codeword of founding identity.

This identity clearly breaks with an existence, already discussed, between the two cultures, German and Turkish, in the field of migration literature, because the Kanaks are bastards who, at one and the same time, no longer have and want a national identity. Their acting fields are gestures and language. Their cascades of words manifest a tremendous delight in playing with words; they show their feeling for rhythm and their musicality. ZAIMOGLU's *Kanak Sprak* seizes the gestures of the battles of words. The target of these attacks, however, is not rivals from the same scene, but above all the German petty bourgeoisie. Some critics emphasize this affinity of *Kanak-Sprak* texts to Hip Hop. BAX de-

10 "Ich kann es nicht mehr hören, dass von sprachdefizitären Jugendlichen gesprochen wird. Diese sind einfach multimedial. Die Youngster können Denglish, sie können Kanak Sprak, sie können Video-Clip-Deutsch, und sie können wunderbares Deutsch." From: "Existentielle Geschichten aus einer dunklen Welt", Feridun Zaimoğlu interviewt von Erker-Mitherausgeber Frank LINGNAU, <[www.am-erker.de/int/int46fz.htm](http://www.am-erker.de/int/int46fz.htm)> (last access date June 2006) (translation mine).



scribes ZAIMOGLU as the “most successful Turkish rapper with a German tongue”.<sup>11</sup>

ZAIMOGLU himself does not speak and write from the edge of society, because his biography (he studied painting and medicine) must be seen as a very successful story of integration. Yet his biography marks a practice which is central in the context of Kanak philosophy. Describing his motivation for writing, ZAIMOGLU remarks: “It was the will to speak and understand. I haven’t been between two cultures, but I experienced and spoke things at home and I wanted to carry on speaking outside.”<sup>12</sup>

### A logic of singularity

Within German literature, ÖZDAMAR’s tongue and ZAIMOGLU’s speech stand for a transgressive type of writing. With these two figures, migration literature entirely becomes a linguistic, aesthetic discourse, standing outside every cultural ascription. The anthology of short stories *Zwölf Gramm Glück* (Twelve Grams of Fortune; 2004) shows this very nicely. It is true that ZAIMOGLU in his technique of writing obviously moves away from the Kanak style, but his narration still works within a logic of singularity.

In this anthology of short stories, it seems that Turkey is again emerging as an important theme, but in a very different sense than in the case of the migration literature of the 80s. Central to the stories is not the unsuccessful search for identity, but rather the literary treatment of the foreign and the strange. With his story “Skins” that received the Ingeborg Bachmann Award in the category Award of the Jury, this experience of the strange is impressively expressed.

The narrator, a stranger in a very remote village, haggles in an antique shop over a sheet from a wedding night that has a light brown spot. The blood of defloration is a certificate of authenticity. When the owners of the antique shop learn that the stranger is a doctor, they offer him their daughter, who is of marriageable age. After a short dialogue between the daughter and the outsider, in the course of which the girl offers the man her skin, a man to whom the girl has

11 Daniel BAX, “Abschwellender Straßenslang”, *taz* (10.10.2001), quoted from <<http://www.taz.de/pt/.nf/spText.Name,litera.inx,30>> (last access date 2001-10-10).

12 “Es war der Wille sprechen and verstehen zu können. Ich stand nicht zwischen zwei Kulturen, sondern habe zu Hause Dinge erlebt, erfahren and gesprochen and wollte draußen weiter sprechen.” *Ibid.* (translation mine).

been promised for a long time enters the shop and threatens the stranger. Finally this man cuts the wedding sheet and demands the stranger leave. The outsider finds his fortune to get out of this village in his inner compass.

[...] I step out of the shop and rely on my inner compass which will lead my steps out of this place. And as I know my luck on such days, no stone from a catapult will hit me and no dog will attack me.<sup>13</sup>

In this story the use of surreal elements above all is striking: all persons apart from the stranger have tattoos on their skins, and the antique shop owners' and their daughter's skins are described in great detail. Central to the story is the bargaining about the wedding sheet, the wounded skin that is finally cut; at the same time, both wedding sheet and wounded skin become connected with a story about a hermit who as a figure of holiness represents the myth of origin of the whole village. Everybody and everything are skins. The only non-skin in this story is the outsider's inner compass which leads him out of this village. The outsider speaks the village people's language, but he has no tattoo and he sees his stay as an experience of what is strange. Still he should not be equated with a Westerner, because on the one hand the language of the village people is familiar to him, like his own mother tongue, and on the other hand – and this is the crucial argument – this surreal kind of narration does not admit of being clearly situated geographically. The borders of the village, which run between outsiders and village population, become dislocated in a Kafkaesque manner. In the Kafkaesque narration of the dream, the borders run beyond intercultural discourses, they run on a transcultural level which does not differentiate between Westerner and not-Westerner, or German and Turkish, but between tattoos and the inner compass.

According to Gilles DELEUZE, the task of literature lies in the de-territorialising of language, to create a strangeness in one's own or a particular language, to unmask the language. Beyond a logic of cultural identity, both Emine Sevgi ÖZDAMAR and Feridun ZAIMOĞLU with affirmative consciousness have brought the strange into the German language of literature and thus changed it. Corresponding to the task of the writer and literature which concords with Juan GOYTISOLO's imagination of the future, the writer invents a new language,

13 “[...] ich trete aus dem Laden und verlasse mich auf meinen inneren Kompass, der meine Schritte zum Ortsausgang leiten wird, und wie ich mein Glück an solchen Tagen kenne, wird mich kein Stein aus einer Zwillie treffen noch ein Hund anfallen.” Feridun ZAIMOĞLU, *Zwölf Gramm Glück*, Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 2004:121 (translation mine).

a foreign language within the language. He produces a new grammatical or syntactical power. He tears the language out of its usual paths and lets it rave. On occasion the language heads altogether for an a-syntactical, a-grammatical frontier, fragments identities and produces placeless singularities.<sup>14</sup>

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14 See Gilles DELEUZE, "Die Literatur und das Leben". In: ID., *Kritik und Klinik*, Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 2000:11–18.

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