



Reconstructing identity: Women's Voices in Transcultural Refugee Narrative of Feridun Zaimoglu's *Leyla*

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Abstract:

German-Turkish literature represents a fascinating segment of contemporary literary studies, in which this literary phenomenon gained its momentum particularly in the 1960s, when large waves of Turkish guest workers arrived in Germany and navigated life between two contrasting cultural worlds. In this way, this paper explores the representation of women and transcultural identity formation within the refugee narratives of Feridun Zaimoglu's *Leyla*. By applying Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and the transcultural paradigm, this paper will explore how the author depicts culture, gender, and identity intersect in the context of migration and displacement for the Turkish woman immigrant, Leyla, who is raised in a patriarchal society that expects women to play traditional roles until her life takes a drastic change with her family's relocation to Germany as part of Gastarbeiter migration where she experiences not only alienation and an identity crisis but also strength to find her own way in a multicultural world. In this way, one deals with the question- What are the internal and external conflicts faced by migrant women? Furthermore, it questions that—whether it is only men who uphold patriarchal concepts of culture and tradition, or do women also contribute to the perpetuation of such notions? By synthesizing Welsch's 'Transculturality' and Bhabha's 'Hybridity', this paper further analyzes the fluidity of cultural identities and the complex negotiations involved in the migrant experience and also contributes to a deeper understanding of gendered dimensions of migration.

Keywords: German-Turkish Literature, Gender and Identity, Migration and Displacement, Cultural Hybridity, Transcultural Paradigm.

1. Introduction

German-Turkish literature known as "Gastarbeiter literature" represents a dynamic and evolving part of modern literary discourse, originating from the historical encounter between German and Turkish cultures. This genre emerged significantly in the 1960s when Turkish guest workers migrated to Germany, bringing not only their labor but also their cultural experiences and challenges, as they navigated the dichotomy between their homeland and their new environment. But at the same time, Gastarbeiter (Guest workers) literature was initially marginalized and not fully integrated into the national literary canon. "Texts written by Gastarbeiter were accepted within the conventions of a temporary literary phenomenon and were not regarded as permanent marker of a subculture, they were seen as entirely foreign literature." (Olaru, 2017, p. 42) Prominent examples of this literary movement include works such as Yade Kara's *Selam Berlin* and *Café Cyprus*, which serve as representation of the hybrid

identities and experiences of Turkish migrant in Germany. “The 1980s and 1990s were decades characterized by mild social tensions in Germany, where the children of the migrants who settled in the first half of the 1960s were confronted with ostracization and racism.” (Olaru, 2017, p.4)

Tensions arising from the conflict between customary values and modernity, especially for the young generation of individuals, represent a common theme throughout migrant communities, as this conflict manifests in disagreements over lifestyle choices like career paths, relationships or personal freedom. Young generation writers like Emine Sevgi Özdamer and Feridun Zaimoglu have been instrumental in highlighting key themes like home, identity, language, foreignness and the coexistence of two cultures. These works show both internal and external conflicts confronting the young generation individuals. Cultural values that are customary and modernity's demands cause conflict for them in another country. “The real difference lies in the legitimization of their existence, or in other words, in the framing of their necessity to the economy and their place in the host society.” (Adamopoulou, 2023, p.2)

In this way “Leyla” serves to illuminate themes such as identity, self-determination and cultural integration from a female perspective, in which it tends to show how young migrants, especially, women, are often shaped between the expectations of their families and traditional values. At the same time, this novel symbolizes a change in which generational conflicts and social progress, in which for instance, the older generation may struggle to preserve cultural heritage, while the younger generation may represent the attempt to balance this traditional heritage with the need to navigate a modern or westernized world. In this regard, the question “Who am I?” is a central motif, showing a conflict, whereby themes such as education, self-determination and adaptation to the new culture are presented. Zaimoglu critiques the limitations of traditional structures through Leyla, celebrating the resilience of women navigating identity complexities in a changing world and highlighting the clash between rural traditionalism and urban modernity's allure. This clash can be situated within Wolfgang Welsch's concept of Transculturality, characterized by fluid cultural boundaries and described as a dynamic model. This paper synthesizes Welsch's concept of Transculturality and Bhabha's Hybridity to further analyze the fluid nature of cultural identities and the intricate negotiations inherent in the migrant experience, while also contributing to a more profound understanding of gendered aspects of migration. In this context, this paper deals with two arguments-

- i. What are the internal and external challenges experienced by migrants? How does this work explore intergenerational conflicts within migrant families?
- ii. Is it only men who uphold patriarchal concepts of culture and tradition, or do women contribute to the perpetuation of such notions?

2. The Portrayal of Women's Lives through Leyla's Story

The author writes Leyla from the perspective of second- generation migrants, focusing on the story of a young Turkish girl who moves in a field of tension between a liberal, modern society and traditional Turkish culture. “Das schwierige Leben kennt Leyla seit frühesten Kindheit. (Leyla has known the difficult life since early childhood)” (Studer, 2006 p.02) Leyla describes her life from childhood to her marriage and arrival in Germany at almost twenty years of age. The story follows Leyla's inner struggles as she tries to find her identity, torn between the expectations of her traditional upbringing and her desire to break free from them. “Solange sie jedoch in Istanbul leben, gibt es kein Glück für sie. (However as long as they live in Istanbul, there is no happiness for them)” (Studer, 2006, p.02) This novel highlights the challenges Leyla faces in dealing with the expectations placed on her, especially in relation to family and gender roles. The main motive of the novel is that despite maintaining family values, there is “Eine Auseinandersetzung mit dem fremden Alltag in Deutschland und den Sehnsüchten nach der Heimat (the encounter of the foreign everyday life in Germany and the longing for home)” (Tanzer, 2004, p.313)

2.1 Leyla- Family life

Leyla is the youngest child in the family. She has a good relationship with her siblings. She can talk to them about anything. Despite the fact that Leyla was tormented by her mother during her childhood, Leyla continues to show affection towards her. She grows older and her mother is the only person, who is more supportive and is always available for her. However, when it comes to her father, Leyla perceives him as a tyrant due to his harsh treatment of all his family members. As a daughter, she does not receive the love and understanding that one would normally expect from a father. She never calls her father "father" but rather "der Mann meiner Mutter (my mother's husband)", "der Herr des Hauses (the master of the house)", "der Prügler oder Nährvater (the foster father or the beater)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.88) This shows how she does not see him as her father at all, but rather as a biological progenitor. "Tageüber gibt es Prügel. Nachts gehen wir ins Bett.. Ich bin das jüngste Kind. Mein Vater hat mich so erzogen, nichts zu sehen und nichts zu hören, den Kopf abzuwenden und nichts zu wissen. (During the day we get beaten. At night we go to bed...I am the youngest child. My husband raised me to see nothing and hear nothing, to turn my head away and to know nothing)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.117) In this way, she also draws attention to how the father or a man has become the most authoritative figure in the family, making all decisions for both his children and his wife.

But Leyla's mother serves as a source of hope and strength throughout the novel. She provides Leyla and her family with emotional support and guidance- "Gott, der Leben einhaucht und Leben schenkt, wird schön für die Nahrung Sorge, sagt meiner Mutter (God, who breathes life and gives life, will provide food, says my mother)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.84). This line can be summed up by concluding that her mother is trying to give her childhood support to instill positive thinking and strength in them, since the focus lies on the rule of a man, and her mother has to obey her father's ruling behavior because she has to become a part of this traditional Turkish society. "Meine Mutter verschließt sich unseren Fragen, ob sie ihn verlasse, ob die Verwandten sie mitnehmen. Einmal Heimat, immer Heimat, sagt sie nur, meine schöne Mutter. Sie hat große Schmerzen am Rücken, doch sie putzt und kocht, sie näht, häkelt und strickt. (My mother refuses to answer our questions about whether she is leaving him, whether her relatives are taking with them. Once home, always home, is all she says, my beautiful mother. Her back is in great pain, but she cleans and cooks, she sews crochets and knits." (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.88)

This portrays the struggles of immigrant women and their roles as caregivers, protectors, and sources of emotional stability within their families. But here arises the question of whether women, while maintaining their obedience, also assimilate into patriarchal thinking. In this the author portrays further, how patriarchal values are often internalized by women also. In the scene of Leyla's first period, the inferiority of women is presented from a different perspective, when Leyla begins to develop physically quite early.

When Leyla has her first period, her older sister Yasmin beats her as if she had done something bad. Her sister says "Jetzt bist du in der Hölle, sagt Yasmin, warum hast du es so eilig gehabt?...Ab heute wirst du dich von Männern fernhalten? Ist das klar? Du wirst nicht mehr spielen, jetzt bist du in der Zeit der Frauen, das kleine Mädchen ist vorbei. (Now you are in hell, says Yasmin, why were you in such a hurry? From today on you will stay away from men? Is that clear? You will not play anymore, now you are in the time of women, the little girl days is over.) (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.271) Here Yasmin may be both representing her own perception of what it is to be a woman and also enacting an imposition of societal norms that she too is subject to upon Leyla, illustrating the dissemination of internalized patriarchal values from woman to woman. In this way, Leyla is punished as a child because she doesn't want to wear underwear. Her mother points out to her that taking off her underwear is shameless. Leyla's astonished question - "Ist Unterhosen tragen Gesetz? (Is wearing the underwear the law?)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.52) leads to the notion that where this law or certain community guidelines got its authority from. In this way, Leyla grew up to accept everything without complaining.

When her father's opium business deteriorates and he ends up in a prison in Turkey, he asks Leyla to visit a man and ask for fidelity money. But this man makes Leyla an immoral offer. "Ich mache dir ein Vorschlag... du kannst reinkommen und wenn du mir Lust verschaffst, vergesse ich meinen Zorn und gebe dir dein Reuegeld. (I will make you a proposal.... you can come in and if you make me happy, I will forget my anger and give you your penance money)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.273). In this way, Leyla resists this offer and due to this event forces Leyla and her family to deal with social stigma and financial problems, which ultimately leads to her migration to Germany.

2.2 Leyla in German Environment

The beginning of her life in Germany was difficult for her. When she starts her education in Germany, she meets her new teacher, who is strict and constantly scolds Leyla because she doesn't have a hair bow and she gets hit with a ruler and has to go to the punishment corner. "Haben euch eure Mutter nicht darüber aufgeklärt? Ihr müsst euch ein Fläumchen auf der Oberlippe gesprossen ist, sagt die Lehrerin. Ihr müßt euch die Haare entfernen.... Sie belehrt uns noch lange über die vielen Vorzüge unserer Natur. (Didn't your mother tell you about this? You must a little hair has sprouted on the upper lips, says the teacher. You have to remove the hair... She lectures us for a long time about the many advantages of our nature.)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.325). But Leyla is a good student and her headmaster advises her to go on the trip to get to know the people better. After some persuasion, Leyla's father agrees to the trip. This short trip gives Leyla a great chance to gain new experiences, to see something different, and for at least for a short period of time get out of everyday life. Her teacher says- "Ich möchte dich nicht beschämen, ich spreche zwar dich an, aber diese Möglichkeit geht jede von euch jungen Frauen an. (I don't want to embarrass you, I am talking to you, but this opportunity concerns every one of you young women)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.169).

Moreover, Leyla's internal conflict and the pressure to fit into a foreign society might overshadow any new experiences. The cultural differences and societal expectations she encounters in school might remain just as challenging, even after the trip, because they reflect a more widespread and deeper struggle for belonging and self-acceptance. In addition to their studies, her friends and Siblings- Selda, Tolga and Djengis play an important role in the story, in which their friendship is rooted in shared cultural experiences. When they go to the theater for the first time in Germany, they share their cultural shock experiences with each other- "Was? Rufe ich aus, es gibt Filme mit Kuß-Szenen? Nicht so laut! Zischt Selda, der Mann und die Frau küssen sich nicht richtig, das würde auch die Zensur gar nicht zulassen....Es geht gar nicht um den Kuß, sondern um ein Zeichen der Liebe. (What? Do I shout, there are films with kissing scenes? Not so loud! Selda hisses, the man and the woman shouldn't kiss, the censors wouldn't allow that...Leyla says- it's not about the kiss, it's about a sign of love)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.188)

This aspect of friendship offers an interesting commentary on the pressures that women face in their communities. Leyla and Selda struggle, particularly with the so-called beliefs imposed on women, in the context of a patriarchal, conservative nature. They were shocked to see the women who smoked in front of them. The societal expectations placed on women in conservative societies often create internal conflicts and limit personal freedoms. Leyla and Selda's astonishment at witnessing women smoking openly underscores the significant difference between their own experiences and the more liberated behaviors they observe. This cultural clash acts as a trigger for their personal journey of self-discovery and prompts them to question the traditional norms that have influenced their lives. - "Ja, sage ich dumm, Sie rauchen wie ein Mann. Wir kennen Sie nicht, sagt Selda, Frauen sollen nicht rauchen. Und wer bestimmt denn, wer rauchen darf und wer nicht? Ich weiss nicht Selda. (Yes, I say stupidly, you smoke like a man. We don't know you, says Selda. Women don't smoke. And who decides who can smoke and who can't? I don't know, says Selda) (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.189)

During her studies, Leyla met various men, who reflected general social attitudes towards women. Some take advantage of their positions of power, whereas others inadvertently

highlight their lack of freedom. For example, he meets a boy who is the cousin of Leyla's neighbor- Metin and plays a role in her life. She calls him "The handsome man". He is a student and wants to marry Leyla, although they have not made an eye contact. But they try to talk and Leyla's sister supports their love-"Jetzt ist die Frist zum Davonlaufen, sagt Selda, du machst den Anfang, du wirst die erste sein, und dann laufen wir ihm alle davon. (Now is the time to run away, says Selda, you go first and then we will run away from him) (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.314)

3. The path to self-determination

When Metin proposes to her, the father must consent; he cannot resort to yelling and raging this time, even though he is unwilling to relinquish control of his daughter so easily. However, the marriage is not beginning well. Leyla lacks equipment for her new role, where she tries to fulfill demands of his father-in-law and husband. Her husband is rather conventional and integrates Leyla into numerous social norms and expectations. Her Husband refers to the holy book when he claims power over family or wife. "Hier steht es, schreit er, ihr seid meine Untergebenen. Der Schlüssel zum Paradies ist in meinem Händen! Nicht ich habe die Regeln aufgestellt, sondern der Erhabene, dessen Namen ihr nicht in den Mund nehmen dürft. (Here it is, he shouts, you are my subordinates. The key to paradise is in my hands! It is not who has set the rules, but the exalted one, whose name you must not utter)." (Zaimoglu 2006, p.356)

But Leyla gets to know about her husband's affair in Germany, she doesn't tolerate this in silence. Now Leyla is faced with a life-changing decision. She decides to forget her husband and move to Germany. Even later, when her brothers speak of her son as the "künftigen Sippenältesten (future clan elder)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.439) Leyla takes a stand against this: "Mein Sohn ist mein Sohn und nicht der Älteste einer ehrlosen Gemeinschaft. (My son is my son and not the eldest of a dishonorable community)" (Zaimoglu, 2006, p.445) Leyla's decision can be seen as an act of self-empowerment, as she breaks away from a stressful relationship and begins a new life in a foreign country.

4. Analysis and Conclusion

The narrative is largely presented from Leyla's point of view as the first person narrator, in which in order to weave in other parts of the story, Leyla's subjectivity is thus broken in some places in order to give the story a broader perspective. Along with this, the lives of the characters are largely governed by the rules, i.e. the family members must obey Halid's instructions. The instructions from the head of the authority as known as from men interpreted as a basis of society, on which the entire social image with regard to gender roles is built. The way Leyla's father, Halid, treats his wife can be understood through the perspective of Objectification or the concept of "Sati". In a colonial discourse or context, women were often viewed as symbolic possession that represented both the cultural integrity of the colonized group and sexual or domestic labour that could be controlled by men. Drawing from Spivak's concept of the Subaltern, this analysis explores how women face dual oppression-both as colonized individuals and as gendered subjects. "Sati, meaning a good wife signals a duty- a duty of a wife to her husband and religion" (Ross, 1994, p.93) highlights a dynamic, in which Halid's wife or Leyla's mother is not regarded as an individual with her own identity but rather as a means to satisfy his desires and sustain the family structure. This view is consistent with historical patriarchal and colonial attitudes.

According to Spivak "The women is unable to escape the expectations of her gender." (Eleanor, 1994, p.93) This highlights how women often struggle to break free from the societal expectations imposed on their gender. Even the natural process of menstruation, which is a biological occurrence, is associated with cultural ideas of purity. But Yasmin's slap serves to question of how women, who are often seen as bearers of the Tradition, play a key role in maintaining norms that ultimately limit their freedom. This notion aligns with Spivak's concept of "worlding," (Spivak, 1994, p.51) which explains how colonial and patriarchal ideologies manifest in interpersonal interactions. "What we can do is only understand the 'worlding' of the Third world". (Spivak, 1994, p.53) It refers to a process by which the local population is

convinced or “persuaded” to adopt the colonial versions of reality for understanding their social world.

Conversely, Leyla’s choice to leave her husband and begin a new life in Germany highlight her pursuits of autonomy, which leads to Leyla’s identity as a “third space,” (Bertens, 1995, p.110) that is neither purely Turkish nor purely German. That is, how this space allows for the creation of new meanings and possibilities beyond conventional oppositions or traditional dichotomies such as “colonizer” and “colonized” (Césaire, 2000, p.97) Furthermore, she is perceived as different by Germans, both from a teacher and a friend, and for this reason, she distances herself from her community, in order to integrate into the foreign environment. Bhabha’s notion of hybridity in the context of “Moving Beyond” (Bhabha, 1994, p.1119) i.e. how “hybridization” illustrates the path of the enlightenment rather than alienation. For instance, Leyla’s break from the traditional expectations of her Turkish family exemplifies this concept. “The beyond is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past.... We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.” (Bhabha, 1994, p.1112)

Ultimately, this narrative embodies the core ideas of Transculturality as articulated by Wolfgang Welsch, where identity, including gender is redefine through the exchange and mixing of multiple cultural influences. For example, Leyla’s gender identity is initially deeply rooted in her cultural background, i.e. doing housework, getting married and being a good wife. However, upon moving to Germany, Leyla is confronted with modern gender norms, including perceptions of femininity and behaviors such as women smoking. According to Welsch “And there are- secondly-horizontal-divisions: gender divisions, differences between male and female, or between straight, lesbian and gay can constitute quite different cultural patterns and forms of life.” (Welsch, 2001, p.61)

I would like to conclude this narrative by stating that, how letting go of deeply ingrained Oppression is a long and continuous process that requires sustained effort and resilience. Women from various cultural backgrounds have been engaged in this struggle for decades, navigating societal expectations, cultural constraints and personal aspirations. However, true and lasting change cannot be achieved in isolation: it necessitates a broader exchange of experiences and perspectives across cultural boundaries. Literature plays a crucial role in this process, serving as a bridge that connects diverse narratives and fosters mutual understanding. It provides a platform for marginalized voices, challenges dominant ideologies and facilitates a deeper appreciation of the complexities surrounding gender and identity. In essence, the process of liberation is not just about individual empowerment but also about collective consciousness and cross-cultural dialogue.

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