

Emine Sevgi Özdamar's "A Charwoman's Career Memories of Germany": Prosthetic Imagination and Masquerade

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Turkish-German diasporic memory formations performed within the intersections of a politics of remembrance, issues of ethnicised migration and a sexual politics. Situated within a performance studies context, it analyses Emine Sevgi Özdamar's short story "A Charwoman's Career Memories of Germany" which follows the perspective of a Turkish woman who migrates into Germany as a guest worker. The narrator's engagement with a German history is read as the workings of a "prosthetic imagination," which she uses as a creative tool to implicate her experience of migration in culturally mediated forms of remembrance and world-making. Özdamar's narrator masquerades as the corpse of Ophelia to gain access to a cultural and historical field of representations and uses this insider position to question from within the very discourses that perpetuate objectifying and alienating views of Gastarbeiter (guest worker) women.

Keywords: Diasporic memory, Masquerade, Remembrance, Migrant labour, Sexual politics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Zafer Şenocak, a Turkish-German author, wrote that when his family migrated to Germany from Turkey in 1970, "Germany appeared to (him) more as a language than as land" (2000, 50). This statement, rather than performing an axiomatic interchange of land and language, provides an insight into the complicated relationship between the two. Şenocak's work illustrates that the act of migration into a country involves migrating into that country's language as well as its past; in his work language figures as a field of conflict, engagement, and remembrance. The intricacies of migrating into another language involve processes of estrangement, imagination, and a poetic commitment. Leslie Adelson, who translated Şenocak's essay collection, writes of this commitment in her reading of Şenocak's work, claiming "This is a call to a poetic language, a mode of articulation that creates more labyrinthine ways of knowing time and space, that rescues them from poverty of dualistic coordinates but makes no pretence at redemption" (2000, xxxi). Such a poetic language can be considered memory work by serving the means for an imaginative commitment to another's past; it can underline the different strategies through which diasporic communities carve a place for themselves in popular discourse, and ultimately, it can form the basis of a *performance of memory* which engages imaginatively with language to interweave the strange and the familiar. This reading of memory as a form of work practiced through language resonates with Michael Rothberg's writings on memory as work. In *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonisation*, Rothberg (2009) writes that memory asks us to make the past present in the act of remembrance. According to him, this notion of "making present" understands memory as "a form of work, working through, labour, or

action" (3). If memory is work, then it is not solely an act of private and spontaneous recall, but also a set of practices that help us make sense of and shape our present. The relationship formed between the past and the present, what Şenocak calls paths of remembrance, are forged, facilitated, and transformed by the various different memory work that cultures, nations, and individuals perform. Memory as work stresses the need to regard performativity as that which underlines and exposes the world-making power of acts of remembrance, whilst paving the way for an exploration of the considerations, manipulations and imaginaries that underlie remembrance. This paper is interested in the performance of memory in language and writing as undertaken by Turkish-German author Emine Sevgi Özdamar, a writer and actress who has permanently resided in Berlin since 1971. Her work engages with issues that guest workers have faced in Germany; her writing deals creatively with the entanglement between language and migration and her texts have been studied for the insight they offer into post-war and post-wall German history felt and experienced by migrants and foreigners. Özdamar's short story "A Charwoman's Career Memories of Germany," which is the focus of this paper, is centred around a guest worker's experience of migrating into Germany, her career as a cleaning lady, and the different cultural identities she performs to participate in her host country's culture. Özdamar's work lends itself to a reading of the performance of memory as that through which experiences of migration, alienation, and sexual objectification can be investigated, expressed, and engaged with. Thus, this paper is interested in the performance of this text with the aim of exploring the ways in which memory as work functions in performative and theatrical ways; in my reading I highlight how the performative strategies used by Turkish-German subjects of memory communicate different experiences of migration and diaspora as implicated within a sexual politics.

2. MOTHER TONGUE (*MUTTERZUNGE*)

Özdamar first came to West Berlin in 1965 as a guest worker and stayed for two years, after which she went back to Turkey to study theatre. In 1971, a military coup in Turkey resulted in intensified violence and deepened undergoing political and economic problems. A politics of censorship led to the arrest and persecution of numerous politically active students, which motivated Özdamar to migrate into Germany. She worked as assistant director at the Volksbühne in East Berlin and travelled between the West and East frequently. As a migrant it was much easier for her to cross the Wall than it was for other German citizens, and these crossings constitute an important quality of her work. *Mother Tongue* (*Mutterzunge*), published in 1990, is her debut collection of short stories and it focuses on the loss and regain of language in migration. In it she draws from both German and Turkish; Alberto Manguel (1994) claims that "echoes of ancient Turkish poetry, modern German slang, folktales both German and Turkish mingle in Özdamar's exploration of exile" (157). Her work notates and expresses in valuable ways how the changes that Berlin went through post-wall affected its residents. This issue is brought up by Leslie Adelson (2002), who reads Özdamar's *Mutterzunge* as 'a complex site of German memory work': she claims, "'Turkish' sites of German memory in the first decade of unification are fruitful ground for excavation" (327). I will focus on the last story included in the text, titled "A Charwoman's Career Memories of Germany." This story is written in the first person-perspective of a Turkish woman, whose divorce in Turkey leads her to migrate into Germany as a guest worker. She starts the story by claiming "I am a charwoman; if I couldn't clean, what else would I do? In my country, I was Ophelia" (Özdamar 1994, 131). This reference to Ophelia (and many other Western cultural and historical figures) persists throughout, which implicates her story in a wider web of cultural and historical associations. Moreover, Özdamar's use of different linguistic styles refers to this knowledge of and engagement with "other" cultural material; at times she mimics Shakespearean language, German folk songs, as well as modern German slang.¹ The narrator's use of linguistic manipulation and

¹ In the story, the charwoman arrives in Germany and finds work in different settings, which always hold a certain fantastical and folkloric quality: for example, she first starts working for a Prince, who is a dog, and her job is to collect the Prince's dirt off the floor and take it back to the forester. Her second job consists of cleaning an apartment block, and during work she hears strange songs coming from the flats. After she finds the body of a dead woman in the garbage-can she quits and subsequently meets a junk-dealer woman who tells her she could

her awareness of cultural norms illustrate her ability to bend and perform cultural stereotypes associated with guest workers whilst allowing her to express the difficulties she experienced in migrating to Germany, its language, and its culture.

3. PROSTHETIC MEMORY

Alison Landsberg (2004) coined the term “prosthetic memory” to refer to a type of memory formed “between a person and a historical narrative about the past at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum” where such an immersive interaction makes it possible for the person “to suture himself or herself into a larger history” that they did not live through. These technologies, through which historical narratives take on an experiential and affective quality, make it possible to wear memories prosthetically: they do not belong to the individual, but are attached to their bodies through this “experiential mode of knowledge acquisition” (Landsberg 2004, 1). The concept of prosthetic memory lends itself to a reading of Özdamar’s story and its exploration of memory as that which is performed in the interstices of (bodily) vulnerability and playful manipulation. The narrator of the story writes:

I wanted to get used to Europe slowly, so I travelled by train. I’m on my way, but I’m leaving so many dead behind me. The sleep of a child who sees a ship for the first time, is light; the sleep of a boy who is killed, is over. For him, cigarettes, evening, street, cat are all over. He’ll gallop around on a horse inside me, and perhaps he’ll come to a river towards morning (Özdamar 1994, 135).

On her slow journey to Europe, the woman, who is never named but who “used to be Ophelia,” imagines the light sleep of a child and the death of a boy, and she experiences their presence in corporeal terms: the boy who is killed gallops on a horse inside her. Here, the body becomes the ground on which history takes place, not just the history that belongs to the woman, but the history that happens to others, too. Her journey leaves her vulnerable to these forces of history that happen outside of her but find an echo within her. Prosthetic memory, too, is a form of memory that is felt in a bodily and affective manner; it constitutes acts of remembrance that start from a position of difference, with the acceptance that the memories being experienced do not point towards a lived history, but rather to one that is imaginatively and affectively experienced in the present. The narrator of the story is affected by memories and the lived experiences of others in such similar terms. In prosthetic memory, “technologies of mass culture” (Landsberg 2004, 2) facilitate the acquisition of other’s memories; a person encounters an experiential site such as a movie theatre which makes this acquisition possible. Özdamar’s narrator does not make contact with such a site, rather, it is the experience of displacement which affects the charwoman in such strong bodily terms and alienates her from her own sense of self. Still, she performs history as that which exists within a web of cultural interactions and signifiers, and the fact that she assumes the history of Ophelia as her own, who is a cultural figure ingrained within and reproduced as an image by mass culture technologies, illustrates her engagement with mass culture and “mass-mediated memories” (Landsberg 2004, 17). Her playful engagement with German (and more widely, “Western”) cultural material makes it difficult to decipher what is an authentic memory and what is not. The charwoman’s imagined past as Ophelia haunts her; she writes “A corpse flew in the sky tralala, sky corpse, water corpse tralala, everywhere murders tralala, in green trousers, a pink blouse in a plastic bag that I found on an Intercity train” (Özdamar 1994, 137). It comes back to her, as if moved by a tidal motion, haunting her presence. According to Landsberg (2004), the ability to commit to a history that does not belong to one constitutes the “conditions for ethical thinking precisely by encouraging people to feel connected to, while recognising the alterity of other” (9). Consequently, prosthetic memory confuses the boundaries between individual and collective memory by repudiating memory’s link to notions of ownership and authenticity. The charwoman’s prosthetic memory performs a similar act by allowing her to inhabit the historical and cultural landscape of her

have been an actress in the theatre. At the end of the story, the charwoman visits the theatre to ask for a job, to become an actress, which is where the story comes to an end.

host country, to which she is an outsider, and this act of corporeal reimagining troubles issues of ownership by highlighting the performativity inherent in the formation of memories. In “A Charwoman’s Career Memories of Germany,” the charwoman wears the fate of Ophelia on her body, as her past, and experiences the memories of others as hers. For the narrator exists in a landscape of memory, a place where memory is intensified and weaves itself into the sights, smells and sounds of the present. It is not a matter of which memories belong to her, rather it is her imaginative commitment and manipulation of cultural signifiers that constitute the narrator’s place in this world of memory. The way she prosthetically wears these memories underline not just her role in upsetting notions of authenticity and ownership, but also a deep sense of vulnerability she experiences in her host culture, which is at times conceived of as a threat to her bodily integrity, to her sense of self. Water as a metaphor recurs throughout the story and stresses the often violent and tidal motion of such a drifting between cultural identities; she is a “water corpse” (Özdamar 1994, 137) who enacts the violent way in which migration can untether stable notions of identity and history: while such a disjuncture can form the basis of a vital understanding of memory-work, it is equally important to express how such a form of remembrance can leave subjects of memory in vulnerable positions.

4. PROSTHETIC IMAGINATION AND MASQUERADE

In the story, the narrator’s engagement with a German history can be expressed as the workings of a prosthetic imagination, which she uses as a creative tool to implicate her experience of migration in culturally mediated forms of remembrance and world-making. This is highlighted with most clarity in the concluding section, where the narrator is told that she is a beautiful woman who “could have been an actress in the theatre” which motivates her to imagine a cultural and theatrical meeting between figures such as Hamlet, Ophelia, Caesar, Cleopatra, Woyzcek, Nathan der Weise, Georg Heym, die Stumme Kathrin, Miss Julie, Artaud, Rimbaud, Medea, ‘all the fools in Shakespeare’, plastic snakes, and many others. The beginning of this section sets the stage as “a single men’s pissoir, Caesar, the chief pisser, is giving three journalists an interview (...)” (Özdamar 1994, 143). The narrator stages a scene that is acted out by the historical and cultural figures listed above, and the scenes that follow perform the entanglements between the past and the present in theatrical terms. She writes, “Ophelia cleans a masturbating employee’s sperm off the floor of the men’s pissoir and shakes the sperm onto Hamlet’s mother’s freshly starched blue dress” (Özdamar 1994, 144). Sometime later “Hitler and Eva Braun appear and speak to the extras: “If you continue, it would be better for you to go to the other half, your place is behind the wall and you can’t go onto the beautiful Autobahn even in your dreams” (Özdamar 1994, 145). The narrator uses prosthetic imagination to bring into relation figures from different time periods. Not only do these figures speak to each other, but they also speak of the narrator’s present: the charwoman casts them imaginatively in order to probe into the power relations that are staged in the interstices of cultural and political representations. This in turn reveals insights regarding who is allowed to enter such political and cultural discourses, such as when the figure of Hitler announces to the cast “your place is behind the wall.” These figures enact themselves out within a web of economic, sexual and social transactions and here, prosthetic imagination serves the means through which the charwoman as an immigrant takes part in a national and cultural narrative: she uses already existing cultural and historical material to stage a set of playful interventions. Such an imaginative re-staging of history and culture illustrate how the two inform and shape each other as political fields that perform themselves in ways that alienate and seek to dominate cultural outsiders such as Turkish migrants in Germany. A passage goes,

The plastic snakes say “Fool, Fool” and telephone a high official who’s in his hotel room ogling the arse of one of Ophelia’s sisters. (...) He says to Ophelia’s sister: “Now get dressed, go into the bathroom and imagine that I’m Polonius, your father.” (...) “and go out and come back as Ophelia, back from Latin America, and show me your arse burned by the Latin American sun and then smear your skin cream on my left ball.” (...) “Smear it softly, Woyzcek, excuse me, Ophelia, slowly...” (Özdamar 1994, 147).

This passage illustrates the ways in which sexist, orientalist and imperialistic practices work in an entangled and intersectional manner; Ophelia is objectified and fetishized as a cultural other, an “exotic” Latin American woman who is expected to serve the men around her. Here the text highlights the workings of an orientalist imagination which projects fetishized reflections of cultural signifiers onto a memorial landscape of ghostly figures, and these reflections reveal the problematic status of culturally mediated memories that serve to perpetuate harmful and objectifying cultural representations of women. The narrator’s prosthetic imagining of these figures’ interaction reveals how images and metaphors shape the language subjects of memory use to write themselves into relation with their host countries. She performs history as that which is experienced through cultural means and representations; yet at the same time, her self-conscious staging of a theatre of power relations enact the possibility of intervening in such a cultural production of history. In “A Charwoman’s Career Memories of Germany,” the narrator wears the memories of others in a way that leaves her vulnerable to experiences of alienation, yet Özdamar’s playful use of language and her staging of history on such theatrical terms highlights the narrator’s ability to manipulate such structures from within.

The ways in which such a prosthetic imagination introduces theatricality and performativity into practices of remembrance can be studied as a form of masquerade. To explore the link between performativity, language and memory-work further, I will make use of the notions of “mimicry” and “masquerade” that Katrin Sieg (2009) refers to extensively in her work on ethnic drag. According to Sieg, mimicry and masquerade are techniques through which racial identity can be performed. These techniques have been theorised in opposition to each other, as “affirmative mimesis” and “critical masquerade.” This distinction is founded on the fact that mimesis, as a process which determines what can be termed an authentic representation, has been ideologically complicit with oppressive practices such as colonialism. Sieg (2009) writes about this complicity when she claims that mimesis admits

a cultural representation ought to faithfully represent an ideal, an act, or “nature” as homologous to essentialist ideas about the (gendered, sexual, or racial) nature of a person or group, in which their physical appearance and social behaviour expresses an inner truth (24).

Naturalistic mimesis as a performance of an authentic reality has been questioned by postmodern, postcolonial, feminist, and queer studies: scholars have pointed out that what mimesis seeks to perform as “natural” is only a version of reality and identity that serves dominant ideologies and discourses. Such an exploration and critique of mimesis has uncovered different avenues for a study of theatricality and identity politics, which is where critical masquerade as a self-conscious performance of identity is theorised. Masquerade consists of a poor imitation, which in its Brechtian sense “aims to subvert, resist, and transform the social order” (Sieg 2009, 21). It does this by using estrangement techniques, through which the correlation between appearances and essences are questioned and distanced. In masquerade, a mask is put on which makes the performance of a particular identity possible, but the presence of the mask is a reminder of the distance between the actor and the role. Sieg writes, “these poststructuralist strategies all hinge on the severing of signifier and signified, act and essence, performer and mask, in order to contest the truth claims undergirding mimesis (...)” (2009, 24). In “A Charwoman’s Career Memories of Germany” the narrator’s prosthetic imagination allows her to masquerade as Ophelia to form a relationship to a German past and present. There is a rift between the narrator’s identity as Ophelia and as a Turkish charwoman, and this rift makes it possible for her to move between these two subject positions, allowing her to perform a form of remembrance that questions the possibility of an authentic memory culture. As per Sieg, masquerade serves the means through which she questions the relationship between act and essence, performer and mask. The charwoman’s position as a guest worker and “outsider” makes it difficult for her to take part in the production of culture and history in Germany. As such, she masquerades as the corpse of Ophelia to gain access to a cultural and historical field of representations and uses this insider position to question from within the very discourses that perpetuate objectifying and alienating views of Gastarbeiter women. Ophelia is a character whose silence in *Hamlet* has provoked many retellings

of her story; she is the archetypal mad woman whose madness has been studied in depth as a form of female insanity (Showalter 2016). According to the critic Lee Edwards (1979), “we can imagine Hamlet’s story without Ophelia, but Ophelia literally has no story without Hamlet” (36), and this silent and suicidal female character is used as a metaphor throughout Özdamar’s story to highlight the ways in which guest workers have also been seen as silent witnesses to their own status as outsiders - like Ophelia “as one incapable of her own distress” (Shakespeare 1986 [1603], 256) - whose language does not form the foundations for their contribution to a German past or present. Ophelia “who has no story without Hamlet” refers to the lack of female representation in the German guest worker narrative; the water metaphor and the tidal haunt of Ophelia recalls this image of the silent and incomprehensible female guest worker, whose experience of alienation is perpetuated within a constellation of sexual, cultural and economic power relations.

5. CONCLUSION

Özdamar’s staging of history as theatre underlines the performativity that undergirds identity formations; she highlights the ways in which migrant identities (as well as other cultural identities) can be calculated performances that are used as survival mechanisms in host cultures that designate a place of otherness for them. At the end of the story, the narrator visits the theatre, thinking “I am such a beautiful woman, I can be an actress in this theatre” (Özdamar 1994, 151). Once there, she is told, “Here is the floor-polisher, the stage is polished daily; the stage is staged daily, the polisher is polished daily; no, no, the stage is polished daily” (Özdamar 1994, 152). The ending reminds the reader of the theatrical ways in which history is staged in the present as well as the performative nature of identities that we think are stable, such as the stereotypical image of the “suicidal guest worker” and “the tragic Oriental.” In conclusion, with “A Charwoman’s Career Memories of Germany” Özdamar treads a path of remembrance that is performative (masquerading as cultural others), citational (referencing and reworking already existing cultural material) and affective (felt in a bodily manner). Such a critical intervention, applied to the case of Germany, warns the reader against assuming that Germany’s national history remains a singular and homogeneous entity, whilst introducing a different perspective from which to consider the entanglements between Turkish and German remembrances. The paths that Özdamar maps involve processes of estrangement, imagination, and a poetic commitment - one that not only creates “more labyrinthine ways of knowing time and space” (Adelson 2000 xxxi), but also a labyrinthine history, traced through experiences of migration and diaspora, comprising a complex site of Turkish-German memory work.

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