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Aysel Özakin: Female Turkish Identity between Orientalism and Eurocentrism

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Turkish and German nationality and culture are commonly viewed as opposed, as paradigmatic for the cultures of the Orient and the Occident, divided by hard-to-bridge cultural gaps. Turkish migrant writers in Germany, however, assert multi-layered identities that reflect their daily existence with all of its possibilities and contingencies, embracing both cultures, incorporating them both in the construction of their personal identities.

Questions regarding nationality, ethnicity and cultural differences are—either overtly or covertly—a prevalent theme in the textual production by all ethnic minorities in Germany and are constantly revisited in the works of migrant authors. Thus, migrant authors are reinventing the space of the individual and reallocating the power of defining and representing with the voice of the author/Other. They are exploring as well as exploding the limitations and possibilities of living at the edges of cultures rubbing against each other. By the same token, this means redefining the artist's position in relation to German[1] as well as Turkish literature, culture and politics, and in relation to Germans as well as Turks. In her article "Opposing Oppositions," Leslie Adelson contends that—despite poststructuralist insights into the unstable nature of binary oppositions—the split between *Deutschsprachige Literatur and Migrantenliteratur* continues to abide in the arena of contemporary German Studies (305). Adelson challenges Turkish-German oppositions and demonstrates that in thier fiction "migrant authors" question the national and cultural bipolarity between German and Turkish culture. She further argues that "migrant" authors employ different strategies which confirm the production of these texts as cultural artifacts that exhibit the essentially "hybrid, liminal, and performative" nature of culture (306).

The author Aysel Özakin is a case in point. My paper addresses the ways in which issues of identity and politics and considerations of artistic and personal freedom are reflected in the writing of a Turkish woman writer in Germany. I will show that Özakin distances herself from national, cultural—and any other—categorizations, and rejects being entirely part of

one or the other culture. Instead, she proposes to belong to an aloof international artist community.

Aysel Özakin, one of the most well-known Turkish writers in Germany, arrived in the Federal Republic three months after the September 1980 Turkish military coup. She already had gained remarkable success in Turkey and had been awarded two renowned literary prizes when she was invited by the *Berliner Literarisches Colloquium* and then decided to stay. In Germany, Aysel Özakin is considered a migrant writer, even though she was a renowned writer in Turkey before she moved to the Federal Republic,[2] where she wrote literary texts and essays thematizing issues of self and identity and her migration experience as a Turkish woman in Germany. Except for her volume of poems entitled "Du bist willkommen," all of Özakin's texts are translated into German from Turkish or—as in the case of her two most recent works[3]— from English.

In the early 1990s, Özakin left Germany for England in order to assert her artistic freedom and avoid being pigeonholed by common German assumptions and widespread categorizations regarding Turkish women and "guest workers."[4] This essay will reveal how Özakin's mostly female protagonists view issues of culture and identity and how they perceive the Federal Republic's de facto multicultural reality from the perspective of an individual within a marginalized ethnic group. Özakin's texts recount her struggle with German concepts of German identity and of foreigners, while they illuminate cultural similarities and underline gender and class alliances bridging the so-called "cultural gap" between Europe and "The Orient." To my knowledge, Özakin is the first Turkish woman writer who deals in her work with the intersection of nationality, class, gender, and education in a situation of migration. She thematizes and criticizes the position of the minority writer/artist *vis-á-vis* the German literary audience, as well as vis-á-vis her Turkish fellow migrants in Germany. In her works she grapples with issues of gender, migration, education, and ethnicity in relation to the role assigned to "the migrant writer" in Germany, thereby questioning gender, cultural, and national certainties. As the Australian literary critic Sneja Gunew puts it in "Migrant Women Writers," for women migrant writers, issues of being constructed and excluded come together, since "[b]oth women and migrants internalize the process whereby the culture constructs them, and it requires a great deal of self-conscious analysis before they are able to step (and only ever in part) outside these constructs" (19). Özakin's grappling with these issues is easily traced in her literary works, essays and interviews. For Gunew, "[l]ooking at migrant women's writing is a way of questioning literary axonomies" (25). Migrant writers are thrown into a situation in which they experience on a personal level cultural differences which often fictionalized in their writing.

In "Framing Marginality," Gunew observed the concurrence of two critical viewpoints in women migrants' writing: "whereas women problematize gender categories, migrants put into question the convergence of culture and nationalism" (149) and argues that their unique position privileges them to be agents of cultural critique. For Turkish woman writers in the Federal Republic, constructions of German as well as Turkish identity and nationality and gender roles come into play. Aysel Özakin's literary texts reflect on issues of national, gender, and cultural identity within the context of the German host culture and its preconceptions and prejudices in regard to Turkish culture, and in particular in regard to Turkish women. Conceptualized in a broader context, Özakin's writings should be seen as cultural artifacts of the specific historical, political and social moment to which they respond. Therefore they should be viewed—to quote the literary critic Arlene Teraoka in her article "Is Culture to Us What Text is to Anthropology?"—as "interactive, as interlocative, [...]as textual interventions in the social process—as an active part of culture" (190). Seen in this manner as one variation of a plethora of cultural artifacts, literary and otherwise, Özakin's texts participate in a multitude of current contradictory discourses that negotiate their position within a polyphony of voices. The way in which Özakin intervenes in this current political debate will be examined in this paper.

Özakin's 1983 novel *Die Leidenschaft der Anderen* deals with the encounters of her female Turkish writer-protagonist on a lecture trip in Germany and undeniably carries autobiographical traces: she problematizes the position ascribed to her protagonist who is orientalized, exoticized, and admired as a "different kind of Turkish woman." Her protagonist crosses national boundaries and aligns herself with a comparable subculture in the 19805 Federal Republic, equating her experiences as a leftist student in Istanbul with her present encounters in Germany's alternative/leftist scene. She finds herself liking the way members of the leftist scene treat each other, their political engagement, their critical stands, and the way they communicate (LdA 34). She feels at home here based on education, class, political conviction, and world views, because she is easily able to align herself with Germany's counter culture. In her writings, Özakin establishes a more heterogeneous, but still simplified bipolar image of German culture: the cool average Germans as contrasted with the warmth of the alternative scene of the 1980s. Ultimately, this picture serves to locate her as an intellectual and artist in the German scene compatible with the Turkish subculture she had to leave behind, and it also underscores the gap between herself and Turkish migrant workers in Germany.

Transgressing national borders of class and political alliance, Özakin exhibits her belief in the compatibility of similar social classes across na-

tional borders and deemphasizes the importance of national and cultural factors. Özakin's protagonist states:

> Sometimes I feel as if the cultural difference between generations or people who have different opinions is bigger than the one between people who come from different countries, but share opinions. The phrase 'Two Cultures' - 'Two Worlds' I find idealistic and superficial. The ideology of the hierarchy divides people more than the difference between cultures. (LdA 90)[5]

In this novel, Özakin also questions the way she is viewed as a Turkish minority writer. Her writer-protagonist is made painfully aware that the German literary scene expects her to perpetuate stereotypes of Turkish culture and its oppression of women. The audience seems more interested in the informative, sociological value of her literary texts than their poetic aspects. Her protagonist feels that her writing is not sufficiently appreciated as a work of art, as a literary product, but rather that it is read for its informational value regarding "oppressed women in Turkey" or "the life of a Turkish woman in Germany" (LdA 37,42). But in her very own depiction of gender roles in rural Turkey, Özakin perpetuates that impression. This strategy is, however, used to emphasize the fact, that there *are* women in Turkey who differ from this cliche. Her female protagonists embody exactly that kind of independent, educated, urban woman who defies the common stereotype. In *Leidenschaft*, her protagonist describes her struggles regarding her gender role identification when she states:

> I would like to get to know myself anew, my socialization, I would like to think about the pressure under which I lived as a woman, and also in Europe as a Turkish woman ... indeed, I do experience a shock. (LdA 59)

Özakin's protagonist identifies with Western culture and is afraid that other people might think that she is losing her personality if—as an Oriental woman—she acts like a European woman (LdA 50). In her encounter with a male German friend, she wants to be viewed as a courageous, sovereign, strong feminist, and not as a sentimental, weak Oriental woman (LdA 66). It seems as if she experiences those two distinct options as a dichotomy rather than a continuum of possibilities. Her protagonist also questions the conceptual framework of the literary symposium at which she is reading from her work and distances herself from representing Turkish culture (LdA 77). The symposium's main purpose of cultural mediation is to prove the richness of Turkish culture to the ethnocentric German eye, thereby inadvertently revealing itself as the measure of all things. Özakin points out eurocentrism, sexism and cultural chauvinism and criticizes paternalizing, condescending attitudes of German literary critics. She notices the prevalence of eurocentrism and Western cultural chauvinism on the part of German literary critics as well as the readers. In a 1987 interview she stated:

> After a six year stay in Germany, I don't want to write solely about Fatma. —[Fatma refers here to the German stereotype of the Turkish woman]— I am sick and tired to be constantly invited to conferences about foreign culture in Germany, but never to a poetry colloquium. I am also sick of German critics treating me the way a friendly educator treats a child.[6]

When a male German friend asks her protagonist to accept the fact that by living alone as a Turkish woman, she is an exception and necessarily receives much attention, she answers: "It isn't only that.... It is the hierarchy... Literature is for the European, it belongs to the bourgeoisie, to the man" (LdA 42). In stressing the difference between herself and her friend, who as a German male abroad will be perceived as a European and a free adventurer (LdA 43), she addresses national privilege and gender issues. In her 1989 novel *Die blaue Maske*, her protagonist, a Turkish writer in European exile, voices the same kind of criticism, claiming that nobody takes her seriously as a writer because she neither thematizes the misery of "guest workers," nor the pitiful situation of Turkish women (181). Elsewhere, Özakin argues that in Germany every Turk—even an educated intellectual or artist—is being confined to expressing the sorrows of his suppressed and uneducated countrymen.[7] In *Blaue Maske*, her protagonist concludes that Western literature is racist since the European literary market works according to mechanisms of exclusion, and that it regulates the access to the elite canon of Western "World Literature." It thus limits her artistic freedom by relegating her to a set of topics about which she is assumed to be an expert, for she can draw on her authentic experience in being Turkish, having migrated, and being a woman. The protagonist summarizes the expectations of the European literary market for Third World artists as "either folklore or some sentimental documentary" (BM 182). The Turkish-German author Zafer Şenocak seems to agree pointedly in *Atlas des tropischen Deutschland* when he claims that the literary production of foreign writers in Germany needs to fulfill at least one of the three following criteria in order to be successful: a) to confirm common images regarding the culture of the Other; b) to "enrich" German literature with its distinct Otherness and exoticism; or c) to be simple and unpreten-

tious, an easy read (69-70). Şenocak insinuates that several migrant writers have bought into and been corrupted by these expectations and preconceptions on the side of the German readers and that they have therefore chosen to revive in their works either stereotypical cultural images or— in the choice of genre—the tradition most associated with the Orient: the fairy tale. He also claims that Turkish painters or writers in Germany do not encounter much interest in their works (69) when they try to capture reality with all its complexity in a more experimental way, e.g., by daring to thematize modern life in cosmopolitan cities, topics of modern life, sexuality, or gender role switches.

The German sociologist Krista Tebbe describes the dilemma that national homogenization poses for artists whose nation is looked down upon and contends that personal identity requires being perceived as a subject. An individual cannot handle a continuous confrontation with the construction of his/her homogeneous collective identity, especially if it is a socially despised one. Tebbe claims in "*Das über das Andere angeeignete Eigene*" that the problem is especially severe for Turkish artists in Germany because society wants them to be Turkish/exotic; otherwise they are scorned for having assimilated. If they, however, stress folkloristic moments, they come across as backwards and culturally unworldly (62). In any case, it seems very difficult to receive recognition as an intellectual/artist within the marginalized, homogenized group of Turks in Germany.

Özakin's protagonist in *Leidenschaft* states that while other Turks in Germany are able to turn to national, religious, and traditional modes of behavior, she rejected this option for herself a long time ago. She is different. She does speak against the denigration of Turks in Germany, and claims that she does so because, for one she is Turkish, but even more importantly, because she cannot stand one group of people being denigrated and humiliated by another one (LdA 90). Her primary concern is apparently on the abstract, ethical level. She does not consider herself a spokesperson for the Turkish nation, but instead emphasizes the differences rather than the similarities between herself and Turkish migrant workers. In *Die blaue Maske* Özakin's protagonist emphasizes socio-cultural and educational distinctions and distances herself from the Turk she watches in the Berlin *Tiergarten* by establishing a dichotomy between him as a backward, rough, sex-driven Oriental and herself and other Western "civilized people" (BM 31). This manner of self construction can be better understood in relation to Pierre Bourdieu's 1979 study *Distinction*, which provides us with a model for class delineations and for scrutinizing the myth of an all- encompassing national identity by contending that a society is split by a variety of barely visible class delineations which override the notion of an all-encompassing nation. In the same manner, in her essay "Ali hinter den Spiegeln," Özakin emphasizes her individuality as an artist and distances herself from the stereotype of Turkish immigrants as "guest workers," which mainly consist of manual workers. Taking "guest workers" as representatives for Turkish culture implies a low level of education and specific sets of cultural and religious values.[8] In "Ali hinter den Spiegeln," Özakin flatly rejects the idea of a homogeneous Turkish identity and criticizes the tendency of Germans to see Turks primarily defined by their nationality, and to confine even the Turkish intellectual to the social reality of immigrant workers. She therefore refutes the idea of a nation as an overarching, identity-molding and defining concept, just as Benedict Anderson did in 1983, when he coined the expression "imagined community"[9] to refer to a nation questioning its myth as an all-encompassing identity-molding entity. Özakin contends in "Ali hinter den Spiegeln" that when class and educational differences are overlooked in this homogenizing manner, artistic freedom and avantgardism remain ultimately reserved for the Western intellectual who—contrary to the Non-Western intellectual—is defined through his/her status as an intellectual rather than through his/her nationality (6).

In the American context, the necessity of differentiation within the margin is stressed by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., in "`Ethnic and Minority' Studies" when he observes the development of subcategories and fractions. Arguing against the homogenization of the margin as a static entity, he views the real threat to the margin coming

> not from assimilation or dissolution—from any attempt to denude it of its defiant alterity—but, on the contrary, from the center's attempts to preserve that alterity, which results in the homogenization of the other as, simply, other. The margin's resistance to such homogenization, in turn, takes the form of breeding new margins within the margins, circles within circles, an ever renewed process of differentiation, even fragmentation (298).

Arguing in a similar vein, Edward Said, in "The Politics of Knowledge," asserts that the nationalist politics of identity "quickly proved itself to be insufficient for the ensuing period in the postcolonial world today" (197).[10] In his lecture "The Media and Cultural Identity" on the presentation of Arabs in American media, he takes a stand against the limitations of geographically and ethnically defined concepts of identity. He rejects nationally confining categorizations because they neglect an individual's multifacetedness, "falsify the richness of everyone's historical identity," and

thus lead to impoverishment and simplification of identities. In his endeavor to deconstruct the idea of a cultural identity, he asks:

> Why must we always belong to one and only one culture? Why must cultures define us and bind us, identify and confine us? Why is ethnocentrism our common fate as we look across the artificial barriers erected by the national cultures with feelings of untoward, unnecessary respect, obedience and assent? (46)

In spite of its problems in terms of polarization, Özakin's portrait of Turkey does correct the common Western prejudice—namely that Turkey is a homogeneous, agricultural, backward country. She emphasizes Turkey's actual diversity and socio-cultural variety: big cities thrive on their progressive, more tolerant, politically liberal atmosphere. The boheme and socialist intellectuals of Turkish cities do not differ much from their European counterparts. Anatolia, however, becomes the paradigm for an uneducated, backward, rural life style based on agricultural sustenance, which oppresses women and enforces strict religious practices. Thus, Özakin transfers the prejudicial, homogenizing bipolarity between Europe/the West and the Orient/East to spatial/geographical relations within Turkey itself: the Western part of Turkey and the big cities are portrayed as Western, progressive, cosmopolitan, and diverse; whereas the Eastern regions of Turkey are the opposite. Özakin attempts to align social classes in Germany and Turkey with each other in order to insert the image of the educated progressive urban Western Turk into the prejudicial, homogenizing picture of Turkey as a backward Oriental country. She broadens the image of Turkish culture by portraying its actual differentiation, by making room for the Turkish boheme, artists, intellectuals and by constructing different, non-stereotypical life styles. Between Europe and Turkey, similar attitudes, social behavior and manners bridge what Özakin does not see as a cultural gap between Europe and Turkey, as opposed to the gap within Turkey itself. In this manner, Özakin relocates prejudicial cultural stereotypes within Turkey itself instead of between nations. She finds differences between generations or individuals with diverging world views much more decisive than those between people from different cultures, since the ideology of the socio-economic hierarchy divides people more gravely than these cultures do. Özakin's belief in values arching across the German and Turkish cultural and national boundaries can also be traced in her feminist perspective which rests on a rather undifferentiated notion of "womanhood":

> I tell myself that we women, we don't need a nationality, we are not strange to each other, we have similar bodies, similar love, similar anger; we all stand up against the power of the patriarchy and against all kinds of dominance. Our psychological, physical and ideological commonalities are bigger than the differences of our socializations"[11]

This vision homogenizes women as a monolithical group and overlooks power relations and issues of diversity, class, race, religion, education, and sexual preference, and serves—as Elizabeth Spelman's study *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* demonstrates—the interests of middle class, white feminists. Even though Özakin—because of her pointed criticism of Turkish gender relations—has been proclaimed a feminist writer in Turkey, and was claimed by German feminists as a token Turkish feminist, she herself dissociated herself from this label as well as from any other category in order not to limit her artistic freedom. In this manner, her insistence on artistic freedom seems to override her global and rather unspecific interest in feminism. As an author, Özakin situates her women protagonists in the lower middle class, portraying them as upwardly mobile, well-educated and ambitious in the pursuit of their eventual careers as authors. In all cases, they have to free themselves from the hampering side-effects of a marriage or family life in order to expand their horizons. They sever their bonds, detach themselves, and move to a cosmopolitan city or even leave their home country in order to advance as free individuals and cosmopolitan writers. Their freedom of movement results from their education. These protagonists mingle with their peers in an international, avantgarde scene and are able to connect over national and cultural borders. They reflect Özakin's belief in the autonomous individual, the international, cosmopolitan nature of art, and the capacity of literature to transgress cultural and national boundaries.

In her endeavor to underline her cosmopolitanism, Özakin denies that her Turkish background has had the most crucial impact on her identity formation. Instead, she aligns herself with an avantgardist, cosmopolitan class of artists, writers, and intellectuals, situating herself with the most compatible social groups in Germany. Her bourgeois notion of identity assumes an autonomous, wholesome self that is determined by the pursuit of the best options for her self realization as an artist. Özakin defies common stereotypes of the oppressed Oriental/Turkish woman, and also challenges the West to find a better perspective of a nation trying to locate its position between Oriental and Western traditions, cultures and civilizations. However, Özakin's primary identification as an artist is based on a rather elitist notion of the aloof avantgardist. In this context the alliances that the author establishes are revealing. The author's concept of 'aesthet-

ic culture' assumes the autonomy of aesthetic forms and sees them as belonging to a separate sphere differentiated from economic and political interests.[12] In my interview with Özakin in the summer of 1993, the author maintained that she rejected being categorized based on national, ethnic, or sexual grounds. In this interview, she claimed that "the most important point is to be genuine, to be authentic as a man and as a woman" and defined herself first and foremost as a writer and a cosmopolitan, autonomous individual. She emphasized that her individualistic, cosmopolitan life style allows her insights into different cultures, broadens her horizons, and makes it impossible for her as a complex person to fit into any kind of categorizations. To accommodate this richness of experience and complexity of backgrounds, she proceeds in her writings to construct her identity eclectically by taking aspects from Turkish, French, German and British cultures[13] from which she assembles a hybrid, developing, multilayered whole.

•NOTES

1. This debate among migrant authors regarding the fragile position of their literary work vis-á-vis the "German Literature" as well as in regard to their position as artists is reflected in the anthology *Eine nicht nur deutsche Literatur. Zur Standortbestimmung der "Auslanderliteratur"*, eds. Irmgard Ackermann and Harald Weinrich, (München, Zürich: Piper, 1986). Also see Zafer Şenocak's essay "Wann ist der Fremde zu Hause? Betrachtungen zur Kunst und Kultur von Minderheiten in Deutschland," *Atlas des tropischen Deutschland* 2. ed. (Berlin: Babel-Verlag Hund und Toker, 1993) 64-75. In my interview with Aysel Özakin, the author stated that she never got involved in migrant authors' publishing initiatives in Germany because—having published in Turkey before she came to Germany—she does not see herself belonging to the category of migrant writers.

2. Sabahattin Ali Award (1974), Roman Odili Award (1977).

3. See Aysel Özakin's most recent publications *Glaube, Liebe, Aircondition. Eine türkische Kindheit* (Hamburg and Zürich: Luchterhand, 1991), and *Die Zunge der Berge. Roman* (Hamburg and Zürich: Luchterhand, 1994).

4. See my interview with Aysel Özakin in Annette Wierschke, Schreiben as Selbstbehauptung: Kulturkonflikt und Identität in den Werken von Aysel Özakin. Alev Tekinay und Emine Sevstgi Ozdamar (Frankfurt: Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1996).

5. [My translation, A.W.] See *Die Leidenschaft der Anderen* 90, cited from now on as LdA. All quotations of Aysel Özakin's works in this paper will be my own translations from German. Her book *Die blaue Maske* will be cited as BM.

6. [My translation, A.W.] See also Klaus Farin, "Statt Mitleid lieber Anerkennung." Vorwärts Nr. 13,28. März 1987:40-41. Farin quotes Özakin emphasizing that the foreign artists present at the conference agreed not to allow their literary identity to be reduced to raw material for masters theses about minorities.

7. Özakin makes this German prejudice and her indignation with it very clear in Aysel Özakin. "Ali hinter den Spiegeln. Fragen einer Türkin zum "erfolgreichsten Buch der Welt": Ist Mitleid der vornehmste Ausdruck für Verachtung? Sind wir alle nur unterdrückt und naiv?" *literatur konkret* (1986): 6-9.

8. Sociological studies have shown that cultural stereotypes are hard to counter because they are based on selective patterns of perception. These, in turn, make the acknowledgment of other patterns diverging from the stereotype even more difficult. Vgl. Helma Lutz. *Welten verbinden — Türkische Sozialarbeiterinnen in den Niederlanden und der Bundesrepublik Deutschland* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag für Interkulturelle Kommunikation, 1991); and Lutz Hoffmann/ Herbert Even. *Soziologie der Ausländerfeindlichkeit: Zwischen nationaler Identität und multikultureller Gesellschaft* (Weinheim, Base: Beltz, 1984).

9. See Benedict Anderson's analysis in Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso Editions and NLB, 1983).

10. Edward Said. 'The Politics of Knowledge." *Falling into Theory. Conflicting Views on Reading Literature* Ed. David H. Richter. (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1994) 193-203, 197. First appeared in *Raritan* 11:1 (Summer 1991).

11. [My translation, A.W.] Aysel Özakin. "Wo ist die Freiheit für sie?" taz 926, 14.12.82: 9.

12. See my interview with Aysel Özakin as it appeared in Annette Wierschke *Schreiben als Selbstbehaup-tung: Kulturkonflikt und Identität in den Werken von Aysel Özakin, Alev Tekinay und Emine Sevgi Özdamar* (Frankfurt: Verlag für nterkulturelle Kommunikation, 1996) which reveals this point very clearly.

13. In our interview, Özakin elaborated on those various cultural aspects and summarizes them as follows: *Turkish*: fairy tale, oral story telling; *French*: surrealism; *Russian*: Dostoevsky — psychological writing; *German*: sincerity, free spirit of alternative scene; *British*: humor, detachment.

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