

Emine Sevgi Ozdamar, “Black Eye and His Donkey” (1993)

Abstract

In the wake of the 1992 Bachmann Prize controversy, the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* asked Ozdamar to describe her experiences as a migrant writer in Germany. The following text somewhat sidesteps this topical question, opting instead to narrate her engagement with the theatrical process of staging experiential narratives about migration. Karagdz, or black eye, is a Turkish theatrical genre of shadow puppetry that usually serves as a vehicle for social critique and political satire.

Source

My first play was Karagdz in Alamania, written in 1982. It means “Black Eye in Germany.” I wrote it because I had discovered the letter of a Turkish guest worker. I never knew the man personally. He had gone back to Turkey for good, to his home village.

Guest worker is a term I love. When I encounter it, I always picture two people; one is just sitting there as a guest, and the other is working.

The letter was written on a typewriter. The other thing that struck me about it was that at no point did he say anything bad about Germany. He said, “A worker has no home. Wherever-there-is work is home for him.” He wrote about his wife, who could not stand the life either in Turkey or in Germany. She was always moving from the one country to the other, and on every occasion she was pregnant.

Once, while in Germany, his wife had told him that back home in their village in Turkey, she and his uncle had eaten cherries together from the same tree. Leaving his wife on her own in Germany, he had made the 3,000-kilometer journey to Turkey, merely in order to ask his relatives which of the two had first been standing under the cherry tree. Was it his wife or his uncle? Who had first gone to the tree, and who had gone to join the other already eating cherries?

He questioned relatives and neighbors in the village. The whole affair grew out of all proportion.

While in Germany, he was politicized by Turkish students who were Maoists. Once he was with them outside a factory, handing out leaflets against the Turkish fascists. When the fascists arrived on the scene, the Maoist students disappeared, and he was left standing there alone. The Turkish fascists punched him in the face, leaving one side of it paralyzed.

I could not understand the Turkish he wrote in his letter very well.

I wanted to write a play about him and then invite him back to Germany for the premiere. I wanted to show him that his life was a novel, just as he himself had claimed that it was in his letter. So I made the journey from Germany to Turkey by train.

In Austria, some Yugoslavs joined the train. Construction workers. Some of them had deliberately smashed their fingers with hammers to get a sick note from the doctor and were now on their way home to their wives in Yu-

goslavia, their hands wrapped in bandages.

Greeks, Turks, and Yugoslavs were sitting together in the same train, their common language German. In Yugoslavia, a few Turkish fathers, old men, also got on the train. They had journeyed there from Turkey with empty coffins in order to take back home the bodies of their sons and daughters, killed in accidents on the roads of Yugoslavia as they made their way back from Germany. Standing in the corridor, the fathers smoked cigarettes and talked in hushed voices about the journey and about their dead children. One of them said, "This journey has robbed us of our five souls."

The Yugoslav men sang songs of love and longing about the wives they were returning to, translating them for us in their broken German. The resulting conversation was almost an oratorio, and the mistakes we made in the German language were us. All we had were our mistakes.

In my play *Karagoz in Alamania*, the figure of Karagoz is a Turkish peasant. He sets off for Germany with his talking donkey, leaving his wife behind in the village. Before they reach Germany, Karagoz and the donkey experience many things along the way. The donkey turns into an intellectual, quoting Marx and Socrates, drinking wine and smoking Camel cigarettes. Karagoz's wife is constantly on the move between Turkey and Germany, unable to stand the life in either country. The donkey gets into a conversation with Karagoz's car—an Opel Caravan—about the impending war. The car gets angry, calling for its owner, Karagoz. Karagoz beats the donkey, who, suffering a heart attack, leaves in the company of a figure who is the exact likeness of Karagoz in his youth. Karagoz no longer recognizes his former self. He journeys on again in his Opel Caravan. His journey is endless.

I directed *Karagoz in Alamania* in 1986 at the Frankfurt Playhouse. Because in their various stories and scenes in the play my characters claim to be stars, I looked for actors, professional and amateur, who were stars. For example, I found an elderly Turkish worker, Nihat, who had previously owned a kebab salon and had a good face, like a mafia type. I also found a marvelous Greek opera singer, as well as German, Turkish, and Spanish stars of the stage and screen, all good actors with wonderful faces. In addition, we had a real donkey, a sheep, and three hens. A black lamb took the place of the sheep during rehearsals on stage.

At the start of rehearsals, an almost sacred atmosphere reigned on stage. What we are doing is something special! For the first time, a play about Turks. Hushed voices, loving glances. Slow movements. The animals, too, were friends with one another. Donkey, sheep, and lamb lay down to sleep alongside each other in the same stall. The actress looking after them said, "How they love one another, the animals!"

It lasted for a week. After one week, the normal difficulties of rehearsal work began.

A short while after, the actors got cross with one another; the animals started in their turn. The donkey kicked the sheep or bared his teeth at it; the sheep bit the donkey; between the two of them, the lamb uttered a loud baaaaa. We separated the animals from each other in the stall so that they would not go on fighting during the night. The Turkish star wanted to show the German star, who was acting the part of the Turk, how to play a guest worker. The German said to him, "You caraway-chewing Turk, learn to speak English properly before you try to teach me anything." In response, the Turkish star called him an "SS man" in English.

Once, the German actress looking after the animals brought the sheep and the lamb to rehearsals and shouted, "Who has been spitting on the sheep's head backstage?" The Spanish actor responded, "You with your German love of animals, when the world is full of human beings starving to death."

The German actress slapped the Spanish actor across the face, saying, "You vain Spaniard, you."

One of the German stars greeted me every morning with the words “Good morning, Mrs. Khomeini.”

Only Nihat, the former kebab-salon owner, ran to and fro among the actors, shouting, “What’s going on here? What’s going on here?”

One morning, another Turkish star placed a letter to me on the director’s table. In it, he wrote that if I persisted in loving the gay German actor more than him, he would shortly make his feelings public in a Turkish newspaper.

I invited him for a meal, cooking Turkish food for him. He ate it, criticizing me because it was not salted enough, and so on. But he ate it with relish and drank sweet Turkish coffee. Then he told me the story of his father, who had died at the age of 36 because he felt that he was the constant target of insults. When the German star found out that I had cooked for the Turk, he wanted to make a date with me. Having arranged to meet me at 11 o’clock at night in a restaurant, he turned up two hours late. He laughed, saying, “Oh, you’ve been waiting for me.”

One day, an actress who was playing a Turkish woman appeared at rehearsals wearing a head scarf. I asked her why. A German actor had told her that she ought to thus demonstrate her commitment to being Turkish. On one occasion, the donkey hit the Turkish star in the back of his neck. He had been holding the donkey’s head fairly tightly under his arm, as if to show that the animal was a friend that he was joking with. The German stage designer threw himself onto the donkey to make it release its hold on the star’s neck. We then took him to the hospital, where he received a rabies vaccination. One of the Turkish stars said, “A Turkish donkey would never do a thing like that.” (The donkey was from Frankfurt.) A German star replied, “I get on very well with the donkey. He’d never do anything like that to me.” But then the donkey kicked him, too. He came to me and said, “I’m going to have a word with the donkey.”

During rehearsals, the father, mother, and grandmother of the Greek opera singer all died, as did the 100-year-old aunt of one of the German stars. We thus reached the premiere with several deaths in the cast, not to mention those wounded by the donkey.

I wanted to invite the worker whose letter had prompted me to write the play to the premiere. But he, too, had died—of a heart attack, at age 41, in his home village, sitting on a chair outside his shop.

The theater manager was a nice man who loved his work. When one of the actresses had to speak the lines “Me stay behind / My husband stay Germany / Fuck German woman.” He said: “Please don’t speak that word; otherwise, the Germans will all think that Turkish poetry consists of such expressions.”

As a result, when it came to the dress rehearsal, the actress spoke the lines “My husband stay Germany / Fuck German woman.”

Before the premiere, the theater, out of love for the play and without asking my permission in advance, had leaflets distributed among the audience, in which it attempted to explain the work. “In the course of the play, you will occasionally wonder, Where are we now? Are we in Turkey, or are we in Germany? . . . It may well be that you will have problems ordering the scenes in your mind. They are not logically structured as in the plays we are familiar with. ...”

That was six years ago. I still meet with actors who were involved, or they ring me up. Then they talk about the others:

—She’s got a child now, did you know?

—I met him in Berlin.

—Just now, she's singing at La Scala in Milan.

—Have you heard anything of him?

—Winter is on the way. I wonder whether she'll put on her long coat again?

They pursue one another like lovers.

Source of German original text: Emine Sevgi Özdamar, "Schwarzauge und sein Esel," *Die Zeit*, 26. Februar 1993, in Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling, Anton Kaes und Andreas Langenohl, Hrsg., *Transit Deutschland. Debatten zu Nation und Migration*, München: Konstanz University Press, 2011, S. 577-578, pp. 582-585.

Source of English translation: Deniz Göktürk, David Gramling, and Anton Kaes, eds., *Germany in Transit. Nation and Migration 1955-2005*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007, pp. 398-402.

Translation: David Herricks and Frank Krause

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