

## 72. Deciphering the Boundaries of Ottoman Armenian Female Identity in Zabel Yesayan's *My Soul in Exile*<sup>1</sup>

Şennur BAKIRTAŞ<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

Deciphering the boundaries of female identity in the history of thoughts has been a deep-seated problematic issue since the mainstream, throughout the centuries, put strong emphasis on non-feminist discourses. When specifically focused on the Ottoman Empire, the circumstances, and obstacles that women encounter had no difference than their European counterparts. Ottoman Empire which was a land of different cultures, religions, and ethnic groups, witnessed a fundamental shift in terms of women rights in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a pattern of the Empire, the Ottoman Armenian women writers shed light on some postcolonial issues as well as feminist ones almost a century ago before it is theorized. The concepts of unhomeliness and hybridity as universal ideas are proven to be also timeless in the works of Zabel Yesayan, an Ottoman Armenian women writer, particularly in *My Soul in Exile*. This study aims to analyze the cultural richness of the women's rights movements in the Ottoman Empire fed by different shareholders, such as Ottoman Armenian women writers in this particular paper. To have a better and deeper understanding of cultural and historical roots of women's rights movements consolidates the construction of a stronger female identity since it will prove where we started and how we proceeded. Consequently, this paper intends that hearing multiple voices raised from the same geographic location, as well as being aware of and informed about different challenges, would be a watershed moment in the history of women, consolidating our steps and enriching our cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Ottoman Empire, Ottoman Armenian women writers, unhomeliness, hybridity, Zabel Yesayan, *My Soul in Exile*

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Öğr. Üyesi, Atatürk Üniversitesi, Yabancı Diller Yüksekokulu, Mütercim Tercümanlık Bölümü / Dr., Atatürk University, School of Foreign Languages, Department of Translation and Interpreting (Erzurum-Türkiye), sbakirtas@atauni.edu.tr, **ORCID ID:** 0000-0002-2359-0790, **ROR ID:** https://ror.org/03je5c526, **ISNI:** 0000 0001 0775 759X, **Crossref Funder ID:** 501100004951

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## Zabel Yesayan'ın *Sürgün Ruhum* Adlı Eserinde Osmanlı Ermeni Kadın Kimliğinin Sınırlarını Anlamak<sup>3</sup>

### Öz

Düşünce tarihinde kadın kimliğinin sınırlarının çözümlenmesi, ana akımın yüzyıllar boyunca feminist olmayan söylemlere güçlü bir vurgu yapmasından dolayı derin sorunsallık içeren bir konu olmuştur. Özellikle Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'na odaklanıldığında, kadınların karşılaştıkları koşullar ve engellerin Avrupalı emsallerinden hiçbir farkı yoktur. Farklı kültürlerin, dinlerin ve etnik grupların yaşadığı bir ülke olan Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, 19. yüzyılda kadın hakları açısından köklü bir değişime tanıklık etmiştir. İmparatorluğun bir motifi olarak, Osmanlı Ermeni kadın yazarlar, sömürge sonrası söylem kuramsallaştırılmadan neredeyse bir asır önce bazı sömürge sonrası ve feminist konulara ışık tutmuşlardır. Yurtsuzluk ve melezlik kavramlarının evrensel fikirler olarak zamansız olduğu Osmanlı Ermeni kadın yazar Zabel Yesayan'ın özellikle de *Sürgün Ruhum* ile kanıtlanmıştır. Bu çalışma, Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'ndaki kadın hakları hareketlerinin, özellikle bu makaledeki Osmanlı Ermeni kadın yazar gibi farklı paydaşlar tarafından beslenen kültürel zenginliklerini analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Kadın hakları hareketlerinin kültürel ve tarihsel köklerini daha iyi ve derinden anlamak, nereden başladığımızı ve nasıl ilerlediğimizi kanıtlayacağın için daha güçlü bir kadın kimliğinin inşasını pekiştirir. Sonuç olarak, bu makale, aynı coğrafi konumdan yükselen birden fazla sesi duymanın, farklı zorlukların farkında olmanın ve bunlar hakkında bilgi sahibi olmanın kadın tarihinde bir dönüm noktası olacağını, adımlarımızı sağlamlaştıracağını ve kültürel mirasımızı zenginleştireceğini vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, Osmanlı'da Ermeni kadın yazarlar, yurtsuzluk, melezlik, Zabel Yesayan, *Sürgün Ruhum*

### Introduction

In the midst and through the end of the 19th century, Western women embarked on a quest for their rights in both public and private spheres. Simultaneously, Ottoman women emerged onto the historical stage, advocating for their emancipation within familial, educational, political contexts. It has long been presumed that the majority of our Ottoman female ancestors lacked a voice in asserting their rights. However, contemporary historical evidence demonstrates and acknowledges a collective movement among the women in the Ottoman Empire during this period, with some of these advocates being Ottoman Armenian women.<sup>4</sup> The available body of research, however, is limited in the context of Ottoman female authors but also concerning Ottoman Armenian women writers. This scarcity reflects

<sup>3</sup> It is declared that scientific and ethical principles were followed during the preparation process of this study and all the studies utilised are indicated in the bibliography.

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<sup>4</sup> Lerna Ekmekçioğlu, Melisa Bilal, *Bir Adalet Feryadı Osmanlı'dan Türkiye'ye Beş Ermeni Feminist Yazar 1862-1932*, Aras Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2006, 13-19.

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the broader historical oversight, where women have not been adequately recognized as subjects of historical study.

In the turn of the century, the lands of the Ottoman Empire underwent fundamental changes from various aspects, changes that the Empire's women were not indifferent to. In parallel with these shifts, marked by political turmoil and wars, women were restricted regardless of their national or religious identities. Within the same geographical confines and borders, women were cognizant of the struggles of Western sisters struggling and what they aspired to achieve. Unearthed quite recently, the grandchildren of the empire are now aware of their grandmother's struggle for rights. However, this awareness is mostly limited to the national identity of the grandmothers. As the offspring of the same geography, Ottoman Armenian women writers have also played a significant role in the construction of feminine identity.

To gain a better and more profound understanding of Ottoman Armenian female authors, this study aims to conduct a deeper analysis of diverse cultural richness of the Ottoman Empire. Motivated by these issues, this study particularly focuses on Zabel Yesayan and her literary piece titled *My Soul in Exile*, which serves as a nexus with postcolonial concepts of identity formation. The examination of femininity construction among different ethnic groups within the Empire is also compelling in delineating our understanding of femininity construction. Listening to different voices arising from the same geography and being conscious and informed about various struggles would be a milestone in consolidating the steps of women and enriching their cultural background in the historical timeline.

Formun Altı

### A Short Introduction to Zabel Yesayan

Born in 1878 in Ottoman capital İstanbul, Zabel Yesayan, though relatively unknown to many literature enthusiasts, stands out as one of the key figures in the Armenian feminist movement within the Ottoman Empire. Recently, brought to the forefront by Elif Shafak, Yesayan, a prominent figure among Ottoman Armenians has become a subject of heightened interest in both academic and literary circles. Shafak, during a conference held in 2005 in İstanbul, centered her speech on Yesayan, an Ottoman Armenian author whose recognition extends beyond a broader audience. As emphasized by Shafak, Yesayan's literary journey commenced in Üsküdar, İstanbul, only to culminate in Siberia encompassing a rich array of poems, novels, and articles. Distinguishing herself among her contemporaries, Yesayan holds the distinction of being the first Armenian and one of the initial Ottoman women to pursue higher education. At the age of seventeen in 1895, she ventured to Paris, enrolling in literature and philosophy courses at Sorbonne University. Simultaneously, she supported herself in Paris by editing Guy de Lusignan's Armenian-French French-Armenian dictionary. Returning to İstanbul in 1902, Yesayan's stay lasted no more than two years. Following Young Turk Revolution in 1908, she once again returned to İstanbul. However, with the outbreak of First World War, she found herself in İstanbul, where the conflict between Armenians and the Ottomans escalated. Consequently, she fled to Bulgaria, compelled a reluctant to leave the Ottoman Empire. In the aftermath, she dedicated a significant portion of her life to Armenian orphans and refugees in various locations in Baku, Cairo, Beirut and Alexandria. Eventually, she settled in Soviet Armenia in 1933 and gave lectures on Western Armenian Literature at a university. In the meantime, her writing career was also crowned with *Shirt of Fire* (1934) which also evokes famous Turkish author Halide Edib's *Shirt of Flame* (1922).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Halide Edib and Zabel Yesayan are contemporaries and they both are the elites of their own societies on different continents in the same city. The titles of Edib's *Shirt of Flame* and Yesayan's *Shirt of Fire* evoke a sort of closeness between

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Regardless of where she was, Yesayan was a prolific writer throughout her life. From her first writings on, it is quite explicit she would become a writer: "She has been the only woman who, from a very early age, had the courage and determination to decide that she would become a writer and devote all of her energy to the pursuit of that goal."<sup>6</sup> Along with her literary career, what makes Yesayan an outstanding representative of her age and her nation, is her feminist identity and activism. *My Soul in Exile* follows the story of Emma, the protagonist of the book portrayed as an outstanding talent. In her narrative, Yesayan, through Emma, underpins the illusions of already-established-roles of patriarchy with her sarcasm. It is true that Emma is an acclaimed painter, a talent more expected from a man; as stated by a character Mr Dikran: "It is not like a woman's hand that is holding your brush... Only a man could paint it like that. Only a man could paint a woman in such a way when she was under the influence of the most turbulent and quarrelsome feelings."<sup>7</sup> Painful as it is, this condition of seeing a woman less talented than a man or a man more talented than a woman becomes a critical form of awareness which Yesayan intentionally explores and questions in her fiction and non-fiction.

Yesayan's criticism on such issues continued all her life and she wrote several articles with her feminist identity in the Armenian journal of *Tsađık* published in İstanbul. Yet she published them unsigned to blur the minds of the readers about the gender of their writer. Yesayan's contribution on Armenian intellectual and literary world was also clinched with at least one theatre play written and staged in 1913 or 1914 as Marc Nichanian puts it. Even though it is inferred from her correspondence with her sister the play is staged in Mersin and Adana, there is no published version of the play.<sup>8</sup>

In 1915, after the World War I broke out, the tension between Armenians in Ottoman Empire and the Young Turks arose, and it was intended that Zabel Yesayan would be the only female on the Young Turks' list to be arrested and then deported as discussed in *Finding Zabel Yesayan, Finding Ourselves*.<sup>9</sup> Following such a risk, Yesayan managed to escape to Bulgaria and took refuge there before moving to Baku and the Caucasus. She worked closely with Armenian refugees at this time. She then committed most her life to Armenian orphans and refugees. In 1933, she moved to Soviet Armenia where she taught at Yerevan State University. However, following Stalin regime, she was forced to exile and then she died in unknown circumstances. There are rumors that she drowned and perished in 1943 while living in exile, possibly in Siberia.<sup>10</sup>

### **Uncovering the Boundaries of Hybridity and Unhomeliness in the Colonial Age: *My Soul in Exile***

Published in Vienna in 1922 *My Soul in Exile* is a novella rather than a novel told in the first-person narration of Emma, a talented painter. Yesayan's more active years in writing, 1896-1908, were the time when we witness the dominance of Realism in Western canonical literature. Though it cannot be coined as a Realist novella, it opens with a realistic perspective where we can observe a lot of details on the descriptions of İstanbul by the narrator:

It is neither dark nor bright. Rather, it is the white and bright flicker of the light, reminiscent of stars, that makes everything around, even the line of distant mountain ranges, fluid... Sparks flash endlessly in the valley, where the earth, shaken by the birth pangs, emits a moist and intense smell. Waves of

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the two. Hazal Halavut in her MA thesis focuses on the interaction between them. For further on Edib and Yesayan please see: Hazal Havlavut, *Towards a Literature of Absence: Literary Encounters with Zabel Yesayan and Halide Edib*, İstanbul Bilgi University, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Nichanian, "Zabel Yesayan, Woman and Witness, or the Truth of the Mask", Taderon Pr, 2002, 31-53, 31.

<sup>7</sup> Yesayan, 62. (Translations into English were made by me).

<sup>8</sup> For further on the play of Yesayan see: Nichanian, 32-3.

<sup>9</sup> Atamian, 2011.

<sup>10</sup> Nichanian, 2011, 36-74.

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warm wind make their way through the air slowly, without interfering with and softening the evening coolness. This is undoubtedly the reason why sudden colds make me shiver, despite the fiery heat that burns my forehead.<sup>11</sup>

True to this register, nature descriptions go beyond her literary approach. Nature is depicted as a tool connecting people with their inner selves. As also seen from the opening of the novel above, it uses realist descriptions of the surrounding, yet the flow of the narration is fragmented; it proceeds with a fragmented narration. Proposing that it is a narration formed with the fragments constituting Emma's diary would be ideally proper. Most of the time it is difficult and sometimes it is impossible to decipher whether the narration follows a chronological order, or whether chapters are linked with each other chronologically. It is more likely constructed upon Emma's different feelings and experiences in an unchronological order.

From the very opening of it, we, as readers understand that Emma is a painter who has just returned to İstanbul for exhibiting her work where she muses on herself and her art through a limited number of encounters and chats with guests. Beyond any doubt, it sets in pre-1915 İstanbul when the relations between Ottoman Armenians and Ottomans were not that much fragile. Meanwhile, the narration, through Emma's feelings, experiences, and observations, tackles the issue of art: its place and role in a social context, as well as its conceivable or impossible reception in a closed community, specifically in the context of Ottoman Armenian community in İstanbul.

Before delving further in the analysis of *My Soul in Exile* with some postcolonial terms such as hybridity, unhomeliness, and subaltern, the theorists of the terms should be read closer since the terms are contemporary ones and connected with the contemporary condition of the human being while the novella is a little bit older. It is a commonly acknowledged and observed fact the requirements of society lead to the formation of new doctrines, movements, words, and genres as well as technological breakthroughs. To put it in a more tangible sphere, needs give rise to innovations, which has always been a historically observed vicious process. In postcolonial world where the needs of previously colonized hybrid lands require different expectations to express themselves, theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Edward W. Said provide a theoretical base to define the new identity and to disclose its formation. Hybridity, unhomeliness, and exile developed by Bhabha and Said are among the key concepts in having a better understanding of people who in depth fail to attach themselves or identify themselves only through a specific location or culture because of their colonial pasts.

Bhabha who is initially a postcolonial theorist developed several concepts to indicate how the colonized people resisted the power of the colonizer. In *Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha asserts that we should endeavor to comprehend cultural distinctions as a result of hybridity formed during historical transitions. Now in contemporary world, people should not be divided into groups based on "organic," pre-existing characteristics ascribed to ethnic groups. Bhabha proposes that peoples' traits are not shaped by their ethnic background; instead, they are in a cycle of chance and modification on account of personal and historical experiences. In terms of postcolonialism, Bhabha interprets cultures as "hybrids" that are recognized by both their own peoples and colonial powers.

While theorizing such concepts Bhabha also speaks of home and unhomeliness which are vital to his discussion. When the concepts are unnoticeably read, we easily connote home with where we are born and unhomeliness with not having a home. However, Bhabha discusses these concepts more sophisticatedly and indicates that unhomeliness, unlike what it reminds us, has almost nothing to do with space but more of a state of mind or feeling. Parenthetically speaking, Bhabha reveals his own

<sup>11</sup> Zabel Yesayan, *Sürgün Ruhum*, Mehmet Fatih Uslu (Çev.), Aras Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2021, 17.

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concept: “To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres.”<sup>12</sup> True to this register or what Bhabha proposed as unhomed or unhomeliness, Yesayan in her workplaces Emma who identifies herself without belonging to anywhere. As an Armenian born and living in İstanbul she does not feel at home and from her narration we know she spent years abroad where she did not feel at home either. Hence, she is identified with the feeling of unhomeliness or as the title of the novella suggests she feels exiled wherever she goes by carrying her exilic state of mind within herself. To put it in the way Emma voices: “It’s as if we were exiles in a remote foreign country. We are exiles in the land of our birth because we’re deprived of the kind of environment that our people’s collective existence would create around us. Only fragile, loose threads bind us to our native land.”<sup>13</sup> At this point, Emma is hopeless of feeling “at home” since “unhomely” pressures invade her domestic and creative world.

Emma, in her search for a homely moment, feeling or place is most of the time hopeless and desperate. Embittered with the state of her mind, the present moment vanquishes all her hopes and expectations and reopens old wounds: “To hope at any moment and to lose it at any moment, both are possible.”<sup>14</sup> Emma who is more pessimistic in the narration rather than an optimist is interestingly sometimes very cognizant of her pessimism while sometimes she is incapable of interpreting it. Undoubtedly, her pessimism precisely is associated with her unhomeliness. She is a young woman who frequently seems full of joy, light and life yet all these states of mind fade away quite easily, which is more visible in her art since all her paintings are covered with fog. Emma postpones and retrieves feeling “homely” both in her life and in her paintings and hopes to get rid of such a feeling or state of mind in an undetermined future. Her hopelessness deciphered with the fog in her art as “the sun of my bright fatherland has not been born in my paintings yet; but I feel like this fog will dissipate and sun will rise in my future paintings.”<sup>15</sup>

The pessimism of unhomeliness basically recalls in Emma’s story *Out of Place* by Edward Said who is a quite outstanding figure for the postcolonial and orientalist discourses. For Said, unhomeliness cannot be explained with narrow definitions or descriptions which might be also connected with identity but instead it requires unbelonging to anywhere even to a house. More precisely under postcolonial condition, one who feels at home regardless of where they are is more like a person who feels at home:

The man who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his.<sup>16</sup>

Taking Emma’s state of mind into consideration, it should be proposed that she is more like a postcolonial figure who relentlessly wanders from real life to her art. However, the age that she lives in does not present people to belong to more than one place or more than one culture at once. Thus, Emma transcends her age and turns more into a postcolonial character living in the past, in the age of conflicts, wars, trauma, and nationalism. Considered from this perspective, Emma no longer has a homeland even though she longs for it and hopes for it. Remembering Said’s opinions renewably, they put emphasis on homeliness and homeland and highlight the idea that home is nowhere and everywhere, or “For a man

<sup>12</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, Routledge, London & New York, 9.

<sup>13</sup> Yesayan, 37.

<sup>14</sup> Yesayan, 22.

<sup>15</sup> Yesayan, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard, Cambridge, 2002, 185.

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who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live.”<sup>17</sup> To put it another way, Said underlines the compelling role of writing, or art functioning as a home and offering a sense of belonging free from physical location. Through writing or art, he emphasizes creativity and its significance for providing a shelter to live in. A key fact to remember here is that, Said demarcates writing as a place to live for his unhomey position and mind-set. Emma, on the other hand, tries to overcome her unhomeliness with a different style of art: with painting. Painting for Emma is an escape and a shelter where she finds new lands to live while expressing her unbelonging or unhomeliness. While looking for a home in the depths of her maze Emma finds her way out through painting: “I relentlessly searched for myself, while searching I was in deep agony and the upheavals in my soul dominated my art.”<sup>18</sup>

Yesayan's ideas in the narration emerge in the body of Emma. Hence Yesayan, as Emma a fictional character, is a writer/artist of the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century while Said is a theorist of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Said and Yesayan are not contemporaries, and from literary and historical aspects, they do not seem to have a lot in common. However, they tackle the issue of unhomeliness, which has become a global problem in the past century, in comparable ways. Edward Said's exilic soul and Emma's displacement coincide with each other in the horizontal line of the unhomeliness since it seems like what Emma felt has been theorized by Said and Bhabha almost a century later. Here in *My Soul in Exile*, the outcome of unhomeliness and exile is traced within the postcolonial theory though it was written almost a century ago from its development. Despite including some psychological aspects and being described as a “psychological novel” by Krikor Beledian, it more focuses on and “argues against the psychologization of exile.”<sup>19</sup> In her descriptions of nature and paintings, Emma actually portrays her exilic psychology which is also portrayed as unhomeliness in postcolonial fiction. As an Armenian Ottoman living in İstanbul and turning back to İstanbul a long time later, the hybridity of Emma's art is “the place from which something begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond.”<sup>20</sup>

Turning back to Emma and her art, it would be ideally placed that her art does not only reflect her unhomeliness, but also a kind of hybridity. Emma's hybridity originates from her Armenian and Ottoman background, and the state of her hybridity provides her the opportunity to express her “unhomeliness” via her creativity in her paintings. True to her unhomey identity, Emma's paintings are covered with fog. Within the narration, when she brings her paintings into her house, she speaks of this hybridity insensibly: “I have already hung my paintings on the walls of the great hall. These walls are adorned with the Ottoman style decorations of my grandfather who is a talented mason.”<sup>21</sup> Emma uses painting to reflect her “sorrow full with homesickness”<sup>22</sup>, that is, a longing for her fatherland however, even while she is struggling to portray that she belongs to somewhere else her paintings are on Ottoman-style-decorated-walls. At this point, the remarkable fact that Emma, unaware of her hybrid identity, cannot belong to specifically to one unique background; her background has already been furnished by various cultural elements of two different poles.

In an age mostly driven by nationalistic discourses, Emma turns to be a postcolonial figure who cannot be separated from one and placed into other. If she were a character portrayed in contemporary age, she would definitely describe herself as both inside and outside both of the cultures with a hybrid and

<sup>17</sup> Said, *Reflections*, 568.

<sup>18</sup> Yesayan, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Hasmik, 72.

<sup>20</sup> Bhabha, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Yesayan, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Yesayan, 17.

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unbelonging identity, which would also provide productiveness and abundance for her art and identity. As is the case with the most postcolonial authors and characters, feeling insider and outsider is a meaningful and dominant characteristic as explained by the famous postcolonial author Salman Rushdie: "... in a sense I am both inside and outside both the cultures. ...It's curious; it gives you what shall I say stereoscopic vision, so that you can simultaneously look at two societies from both the inside and the outside."<sup>23</sup> Particularly Emma's identity, mostly shaped by her unhomeliness, and exilic moments can be interpreted as her postcolonial unbelonging nature. In such context, what makes Emma's condition unique is her entanglement with current issues as just uncovered— almost a century ago.

Considering Emma's hybridity and her unhomeliness, there is also one significant point connected also with postcolonial theory which should be underpinned. As hinted before, the majority of the postcolonial texts focus on the loss of identity or the hybrid identity, and in this context, quite recently food criticism and postcolonialism have been associated with each other as "food become marker for one's ethnic or cultural identity. Furthermore, food discourse allows people within certain cultures to express their individuality, while at the same time discovering their group membership"<sup>24</sup> The relation between food and group membership and between food and ethnic or cultural identity can also be traced in *My Soul in Exile* through Emma and her feeling at home when she smells rose jam. For Emma, making rose jam at home is ceremonial, it is a moment worthy of indicating: "Today, rose jam is being made at home."<sup>25</sup> Emma is very excited for the ceremony because her aunt dresses carefully up all in white to get prepared making jam. Emma raises the ancestral wisdom needed to produce the jam as a narrator. For her the smell of the jam and the ceremony to make it momentous since its smell connects her with her childhood and with belonging because it is a family tradition to make these jams and there are certain rules to follow which are passed on from generation to generation: Emma refers the process as an "operation" which requires "the process seems methodical, calculated, and an act of significant labor that demands energy and concentration from her aunt."<sup>26</sup>

The demanding and historically preserved process of jam making is a bridge between Emma and her childhood and also between Emma and her ancestral roots: "Preserving the colour of the rose is also a big deal, and there are different ideas about this. But my aunt does not want to try any changes and follows the tradition, she does everything exactly as her mother and grandmothers did."<sup>27</sup> The ceremony is very serious that the roses are separated into different groups that "some will be jam, the better ones will be sherbet..."<sup>28</sup>, which Emma watches carefully with excitement. Jam making becomes a spiritual and meditative exercise as a result of Emma's emotional and historical attachments to it. Her descriptions and enthusiasm give her aunt while watching her aunt's dedication in making jam, implying that domestic abilities cooking in this very specific case which are feminine and obfuscated in the ancestral and ethnic image, are valid, desirable, and necessary for social connection maintenance.

<sup>23</sup> Michael R. Reder (Ed.), *Conversations with Salman Rushdie*, University Press of Mississippi, United States of America, 2000, 5.

<sup>24</sup> Mitch Combs, *Food Discourse: The Communicative Gateway Toward Understanding Formerly Colonized Representation in Parts Unknown*, Illinois State University, 2008, 24.  
<https://ir.library.illinoisstate.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1850&context=etd> (Date Accessed: 21.02.2022)

<sup>25</sup> Yesayan, 53.

<sup>26</sup> Djoulakian, Hasmik, "Feminist Cultural Analysis of an Invisibilized Genocide: Gender, Disability, and Memory in texts by Zabel Yesayan" (2017). Syracuse University Honors Program Capstone Projects. 1064, 73.  
[https://surface.syr.edu/honors\\_capstone/1064](https://surface.syr.edu/honors_capstone/1064) (Date Accessed: 23.02.2022)

<sup>27</sup> Yesayan, 54.

<sup>28</sup> Yesayan, 53.

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Emma's identification of herself with food is a postcolonial aspect as well as a hybrid aspect of the novella. Noteworthy is the fact that not only does rose jam appear in Ottoman cuisine, but Armenian cuisine as well. Regardless of which one borrowed it from who, a mutual point, in addition to the Ottoman-decorated walls with Emma's paintings hanging on them, appears to be the significance of the same kind of jam. Though for a while food discourse is used "as form of protest and as a reclamation of their representation."<sup>29</sup> now its connecting effect is out of discussion. In order to familiarize cultures to each other food becomes a bridge. Consequently, proposing that rose jam establishes a bridge between Ottomans and Ottoman Armenians in a historical and cultural context can also be interpreted as a postcolonial aspect.

Reminding ourselves of food's historical and cultural postcolonial evocations, a crucial point is also to revisit a singular middle ground between Elif Shafak and Zabel Yesayan. Shafak, as one of the very first ones to introduce or made Yesayan known to Turkish academics and readers in 2005, also uses some historically and culturally enriched understanding of some authentic food in her fiction. In 2006, after a year she introduced Yesayan in the conference on Ottoman Armenians, Shafak published *The Bastard of Istanbul* where she also pays close attention to a traditional religious food *ashure*, Noah's pudding, and gives its recipe in detail. Compared to Yesayan, she uses more details and also the ingredients, yet what is mutual is attaching a cultural and historical meaning to the dessert for while putting an emphasis on its demanding and ceremonial ways of cooking which was passed on from generation to generation: "Ashure was the symbol of continuity and stability, the epitome of the good days to come after each storm, no matter how frightening the storm had been."<sup>30</sup>(Emphasis added). As a bound between the generations with its symbolic meaning within the family, it is revealed that just like making jam, making ashure also requires certain steps and rules, which means it is like an "operation" also: "Grandma had soaked the ingredients the day before and was now getting ready to begin cooking. She opened a cupboard and took out a huge cauldron. One always needed a cauldron to cook ashure."<sup>31</sup> Unpuzzling the parallelism in context of cooking and its symbolic meaning for the ancestral backgrounds and their ceremonial significance for the generations and highlighting these traditions to create a sort of belonging, the two narrations place the elders of the families who cook this traditional food to keep the families together. Even if there are some belonging or dislocation issues of the characters within the narratives, they are still capable of having ties with their cultures through food made by the elders in their families.

The ceremonial moment of rose making is a moment that Emma emphasizes once and again that she connects herself through it with her ancestral past. However, there is another strong moment that she does not feel exilic or dislocated but instead belonged and peaceful: her talks with Mrs. Danielian. Her debut as painter to the Ottoman Armenian intellectuals of Istanbul is with an exhibition where Emma is quite engaged with being introduced to Mrs. Danielian. To her, getting the approval and liking of Mrs. Danielian is beyond anything and more meaningful. Thankfully she manages to get the companionship of her through their conversations since "there are few people in this city who could understand each other."<sup>32</sup> And they are the ones who could understand their inner worlds. The closer they know each other, the deeper their conversations are. For Emma who mostly feels isolated, dislocated, and exilic, Mrs. Danielian is like a "sisterly spirit and an exilic comrade."<sup>33</sup> They have a similar perspective to life

<sup>29</sup> Combs, 25.

<sup>30</sup> Elif Shafak, *The Bastard of Istanbul*, 2007, Viking, New York, 271.

<sup>31</sup> Shafak, 271.

<sup>32</sup> Yesayan, 37.

<sup>33</sup> Yesayan, 38.

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and similar sorrows. When Emma and Mrs. Danielian place their art in the context of each other's, those threads become stronger. Despite their difficulties in negotiating the role of art in a landscape that they do not totally feel belonged, their works ground their political trajectory, and they experience a deeper sense of purpose and direction when they consider themselves to be comrades in creative resistance.

By its very nature, exile craves for isolation so that Emma as an exilic spirit deeply feels that isolation however, it takes not long for her to realize that individual feelings of fortitude are delusions. Her art is nourished from collaboration and interaction with others. She learns to identify silences as productive and art as a tool to link individuals to communal ideas and goals through her painting.<sup>34</sup> At that very point, Mrs Danielian represents a lifesaver to convey her existing collectivity which is possible only through being “torn from the past and fenced off from the future”<sup>35</sup> Noteworthy fact is that despite the feeling of exile or isolation, one still needs and starves for a way of belonging in order to achieve their collective existence.

Agreeing on that Emma is inspired by Mrs Danielian both creatively and spiritually, it should be underlined that she is a character putting hearty emphasis on collective existence rather individual existence since “art may be transmitted from an individual body but it percolates and takes shape in the spaces between people, where the origins of experience blur and it becomes impossible—and unnecessary—to tease out ownership over ideas.”<sup>36</sup> Thus the creative boundaries between them turn into productive moments that they contribute not only on their own artistic starving but also on collective existence of them as exilic souls in already-known-lands.

## Conclusion

In her introduction titled “Sürekli Sürgün” [“Continuous Exile”] to *Gardens of Silihdar* by Zabel Yesayan, Elif Shafak draws a poignant parallel with a worldly-acclaimed American author Kurt Vonnegut's *Bluebeard*, highlighting the narrative of Rabo Karabekian, whose father's Anatolian roots and migration history after the Armenian relocation resonate with the broader tapestry of cultural complexities. Shafak recounts a conversation where Rabo asks his father about what he would want to hear if he met a Turkish person. The father's response, as quoted by Shafak, reflects a yearning for acknowledgement: ‘All I want from the Turks is an admission that their country is an uglier and even more joyless place, now that we are gone.’”<sup>37</sup> Shafak concludes her reflections by expressing a shared sense of loss, noting that “we can tell them that we feel their absence in our hearts.”<sup>38</sup> This sentiment underscores the profound impact of historical events on cultural identities and the complex interplay between different ethnic groups within the Ottoman Empire. The Empire, akin to the intricate patterns of a carpet, was a mosaic of diverse cultures. Understanding the dynamic of female movements and their postcolonial reflections requires unraveling this rich cultural history. Regardless of ethnic identity, the women of this geographical space shared common struggles and objectives throughout the past century. Their collective challenges, as Shafak suggests, were timeless and transcended boundaries. In the quest to decode the construction of female identity, there is a call to explore the cultural wealth of the Ottoman Empire, acknowledging the historical contributions of various ethnic groups, including Ottoman Armenian women writers like Yesayan. Embracing this cultural richness becomes a cornerstone in shaping a robust female identity that extends its reach into the mirrors of postcolonial reflections dating

<sup>34</sup> Yesayan, 75-8.

<sup>35</sup> Yesayan, 19.

<sup>36</sup> Combs, 76-77.

<sup>37</sup> Kurt Vonnegut, *Bluebeard*, Random House Trade Paperbacks, 1998, 40.

<sup>38</sup> Elif Shafak, “Sürekli Sürgün”, in *Silahtar Bahçeleri*, Zabel Yesayan, Belge Yayınları, İstanbul, 2013, 7-28, 26.

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back almost a century. The recognition of shared experiences and the weaving together of diverse narratives contribute to the formation of a collective identity that stands resilient against the complexities of history.

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