

DRAWING A LIFE:
EXAMINING WOMEN'S GRAPHIC LIFE
NARRATIVES IN TURKISH LITERATURE

A Master's Thesis

by
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TURKISH LITERATURE

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To my beloved family

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TURKISH LITERATURE

The Graduate School of Economics and Social Sciences
of
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May 2025

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I certify that I have read this thesis and have found that it is fully adequate, in scope and in quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Turkish Literature.

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ABSTRACT

DRAWING A LIFE: EXAMINING WOMEN'S GRAPHIC LIFE NARRATIVES IN TURKISH LITERATURE

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This study examines autobiographical graphic novels, an emerging narrative form in Turkish literature, through the works of female artists. It explores how women have embraced this narrative form, expanded its boundaries, and conveyed their life stories through this hybrid medium from a feminist perspective. These narratives often center not only on the women themselves but also on their mothers, daughters, or grandmothers, as they depict bodies, memories, and personal histories. In doing so, they move beyond the conventions of classical autobiography, opening up a new expressive space in which gender-based experiences gain visibility. Adopting an interdisciplinary approach that includes visual arts, literature, and communication studies, the thesis is framed by literary sociology, feminist criticism, graphic narrative theory, and narratology. Using qualitative textual and visual analysis, the study evaluates selected works by Özge Samancı, Gökçe Yavaş Önal, Aslı Alpar, and Burcu Türker in terms of their narrative techniques, themes, and visual language. The

analysis reveals recurring themes such as the body, memory, family, mother-daughter relationships, intergenerational experience, social pressure, and female solidarity. These themes show how personal stories gain political meaning through drawing. Including artists in foreign contexts suggests a transnational narrative beyond Turkish literature. By focusing on an underexplored area in Türkiye, this thesis offers a fresh contribution to literary studies. It argues that women use graphic life narratives to express experience and develop critical discourse against patriarchal storytelling, positioning this hybrid medium as artistic and political expression.

Key Words: autobiography, graphic narration, graphic novel, life narration, women's writing

ÖZET

BİR HAYAT ÇİZMEK: TÜRK EDEBİYATINDA KADINLARIN GRAFİK HAYAT ANLATILARININ İNCELENMESİ

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Bu tez, Türk edebiyatında yeni örneklerine rastlanan otobiyografik grafik romanları, kadın sanatçıların eserleri üzerinden incelemektedir. Kadınların bu anlatım biçimini nasıl benimsedikleri, sınırlarını nasıl genişlettikleri ve yaşam öykülerini nasıl aktardıkları feminist bir bakışla ele alınmaktadır. Kadınların, kendi hayatlarının yanı sıra annelerinin, kızlarının ya da anneannelerinin öykülerini hem yazarak hem de bedenlerini, anılarını ve hafızalarını çizerek anlattıkları bu hibrit anlatım türü, klasik otobiyografi geleneğinin sınırlarını aşarak toplumsal cinsiyet temelli deneyimlerin görünürlük kazandığı yeni bir ifade alanı sunmaktadır. Çalışma, görsel sanatlar, edebiyat ve iletişim alanlarını kapsayan disiplinler arası bir yaklaşımla ele alınmış, edebiyat sosyolojisi, feminist edebiyat eleştirisi, grafik anlatı kuramı ve anlatıbilim çerçevesinde yapılandırılmıştır. Yöntem olarak nitel metin ve çizgi çözümlemesine başvurulmuş, Özge Samancı, Gökçe Yavaş Önal, Aslı Alpar ve Burcu Türker

tarafından kaleme alınmış seçili eserler, anlatım teknikleri, temalar ve görsel dil açısından değerlendirilmiştir. İnceleme sonucunda, kadın sanatçıların beden, hafıza, aile, anne-kız ilişkisi, kuşaklararası kadınlık deneyimleri, toplumsal baskı ve kadın dayanışması gibi temaları işleyerek çizgiler aracılığıyla kişisel olanın politik boyutunu görünür kıldıkları tespit edilmiştir. Ayrıca eserlerini yabancı dillerde ve farklı ülkelerde yayımlayan kadın sanatçıların çalışmaları, Türk edebiyatının sınırlarını aşan ulusötesi bir kadın anlatısının varlığına işaret etmektedir. Bu tez, grafik anlatının Türkiye’de yeterince araştırılmamış bir alanına odaklanarak edebiyat çalışmalarında yeni bir bakış açısı sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Kadınların, kendi yaşam öykülerinden yola çıkarak kadın deneyimlerini hem kişisel hem kolektif düzeyde çizgilerle ifade etmeleri, ataerkil anlatı biçimlerine karşı eleştirel bir söylem geliştirdiklerini göstermektedir. Bu çalışma, kadınların üretken olduğu hibrit anlatım türünü yalnızca sanatsal değil, politik ve kişisel bir ifade aracı olarak da ele almakta ve önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: grafik anlatı, grafik roman, hayat anlatısı, kadın yazını, otobiyografi

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INTRODUCTION

Storytelling has long served as a fundamental means through which individuals and communities articulate their identities, convey experiences, and transmit cultural memory. From prehistoric cave paintings that visually captured the daily lives, beliefs, and aspirations of early humans, to oral traditions that preserved stories across generations, and eventually to written texts, narrative forms have consistently evolved in both medium and intent. In the Turkish context, storytelling holds a deep-rooted significance, exemplified by communal gatherings where tales were shared to transmit history, language, culture, and artistic values. The tradition of *meddahlık*, a performative, oral storytelling practice, illustrates this rich cultural legacy. Moreover, the integration of narrative with image, especially through the art of miniature painting, played a central role in Ottoman artistic and intellectual life. As storytelling practices evolved throughout history, they gradually shifted from collective narratives to more personal and introspective forms, like journals, or memoirs. This evolution laid the groundwork for autobiographical expression, where individuals began to explore and represent their inner worlds and lived experiences through narrative art.

Derived from the Greek origin of *auto* (self), *bio* (life), and *graphein* (the act of writing), as a literary genre emerged as a formalized method of self-narration, offering authors a platform to construct and reflect upon their own identities. However, visual storytelling, through images, illustrations, and later, graphic narratives, has remained just as vital in shaping and conveying life stories. The visual

mode complements textual self-representation and offers unique ways of articulating memory, emotion, and identity, especially in hybrid formats like graphic narrations.

Life narratives, encompassing a broad spectrum of self-referential storytelling practices, have evolved into various forms. Graphic narratives in comics and graphic novels have gained increasing recognition within literary discourse, merging with life narration to create a contemporary storytelling practice. Storytelling is dynamic, taking on diverse forms across different cultures and literary traditions. Equally important are the questions of who tells the story, how, when, where, and why, each shaping the narrative's meaning and impact. This study emerges from these considerations, aiming to explore how women in and from Türkiye have conveyed their life stories through graphic narratives and how they have enriched the social, literary, and artistic landscape.

No matter where they live or what language they speak, women writers and illustrators have struggled to carve out a space for themselves in literature and art and prove their talent and significance. While traditional autobiographical narratives and scholarly works have predominantly reflected a male-dominated stand, works focusing on women's narratives, which center on female identity, gender, and perspective, have remained underrepresented. Graphic life narratives, combining visual and textual storytelling, provide women with a unique and empowering platform to express their personal experiences and tell their lives. However, academic studies focusing on life stories in a graphical narrative form in the Turkish context remain scarce.¹ This research seeks to fill that gap by examining how graphic

¹ Graphic narrative studies in Türkiye, including related works, academic research, and ongoing discussions, will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 2.

life narratives are positioned within Turkish literature and how female artists utilize this form.

The presence of women in humor magazines, with their art and perspectives on the world, has been significant for feminist criticism in Türkiye. Although many women have had the opportunity to make their art in caricature, the number of works that have come to the forefront as comics has remained relatively low. Some artists published caricatures in magazines that created comic strips with elements of comics, such as character development and continuity. However, they have not produced a standalone graphic novel that focuses on a specific subject and tells a cohesive story without serialization.

Women's graphic narratives in book form only began to emerge when popular series, appreciated by readers, were later compiled and published as albums. When it comes to autobiographical narrative, the existence of comic strips in periodical magazines (and later published as albums) produced by women who draw themselves, tell stories from their own lives, and try to show the women's world with these stories is quite essential for feminist reading. For example, Semra Can's column *Böyleyken Böyle* (2012), where she draws herself and her two cats, and Ramize Erer's *Kız Hikayeleri* (2013), where she tells the migration stories of the women in her family, can be good examples for such readings.

On the other hand, as Levent Cantek points out, graphic novels that are more qualified than comics and that make you want to put a 'bookmark' while reading are recent in Türkiye (Cantek, 2014). Written by Levent Cantek and drawn by various artists, the Ankara Trilogy, known as *Dumankara: Hayat Bir Yangındı* (2013), *Emanet Şehir* (2014), *Uzak Şehir* (2015), and his latest work, *1951* (2018), are

noteworthy works in terms of Turkish literature due to their relative success in publication and sales. Similarly, considering the visibility in stores and the length of the book to put a bookmark while reading, Özge Samancı's *Bırak Üzülünler: Türkiye'de Büyümek* (2017), Orhan Umut Gökçek *Tuş* (2022), and Uğur Erbaş's *Gozo and Sagre* (2024) also stand out as notable graphic works in Türkiye.

We encounter various remarkable and compelling works when examining graphic narratives that focus solely on women's life stories. Özge Samancı's *Bırak Üzülünler: Türkiye'de Büyümek* (2017), *Evil Eyes Sea* (2024), and Burcu Türker's *Tatlı Limonlar* (2024) are among the closest examples to fitting within the bounds of graphic novels (at least with a Western sense). However, in Türkiye, graphic life narratives remain limited, mainly when focusing on women's graphic productions. Moreover, prioritizing genre distinction over content reduces the available examples for analysis. Therefore, in this thesis, rather than assigning a rigid genre classification, the focus is on what these works contribute to women's narratives in the Turkish literary landscape and the scope of feminist criticism in Türkiye. This approach, therefore, offers the opportunity to expand the boundaries of graphic narrative examples. Consequently, within the framework of this thesis, the focus will not be on genre distinctions such as graphic novels versus comics. Thus, autobiographical graphic narratives will be limited to the following aspects:

- 1) narratives that have not previously been serialized in newspapers or magazines but are presented to readers exclusively as standalone books;
- 2) works where the author and illustrator are the same person;
- 3) narratives that center on life stories and the experiences of womanhood.

Therefore, the books of Özge Samancı's *Bırak Üzölsünler: Türkiye'de Büyömek* (2017)², Burcu Türker's *Tatlı Limonlar* (2024)³, Aslı Alpar's *Emine Hanım 'ın Romanı* (2020), Gökçe Yavaş Önal's *İçimdeki Buhranlar* (2020), and *Anne Bak!* (2022) stand out as examples for this study.⁴

Bringing these works together within the defined limitations not only offers a sample of graphic novels or women's graphic life narratives in Türkiye but also invites researchers to examine the authentic elements that this cluster unites. The ability to read these books collectively demonstrates how women expand the conventional boundaries of genres such as autobiography and graphic novels (or comics) by developing their unique narrative styles, thereby enriching storytelling through genre-bending practices. Furthermore, although the original languages of these works are Turkish, English, or German, and they narrate stories deeply rooted in Turkish families, culture, or heritage, the artists such as Özge Samancı (living in the United States) and Burcu Türker (living in Germany) continue their artistic careers abroad, expanding regional readings into a broader transnational perspective, thereby extending the reach of Turkish literature.⁵ Although they do not write in

² English original: *Dare to Disappoint: Growing Up in Turkey* (2015)

³ German original: *Süße Zitronen* (2016)

⁴ Some works that do not fully align with Cantek's definition of graphic novels, namely, "books that require a bookmark while reading," due to their relatively short length, have nonetheless been included in this study as examples of prominent female graphic narratives in Türkiye. Although these works may not meet the conventional length expectations of graphic novels, they are considered significant for their contributions to the field of graphic storytelling and have thus been incorporated into the sample.

⁵ When approached from a regional perspective, limiting Turkish literature solely to works produced within Türkiye's borders and by ethnic Turks overlooks a wealth of literary production rooted in this culturally rich geography. For instance, works by communities such as Armenians, Greeks, and Jews living in Türkiye, who follow different religions or speak different native languages, form part of this broader literary landscape. Similarly, authors like Özge Samancı, Burcu Türker, or Emine Sevgi Özdamar, who write in foreign languages and publish abroad but center their narratives around the memories from Türkiye, offer valuable insights. Including such works within the scope of Turkish literature allows for a transnational reading and understanding of the field. For a more detailed examination within the frameworks of life writing, transnationality, collective memory, and autoethnography, the following source may be consulted:

Turkish or reside in Türkiye, by producing narratives about their country of birth, these authors open up a space for transnational readings. Additionally, the simultaneous inclusion of narratives about mothers, grandmothers, daughters, and other women within the family allows for an analysis of collective female experiences within their cultural context, offering an autoethnographic feminist lens. Consequently, the works analyzed in this study constitute a library of Turkish women's graphic novels and exemplify how women challenge literary and artistic genres, transcend national boundaries, and revitalize intergenerational readings of women's experiences.

In light of these considerations, the study adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach to analyze how women in Turkish literature utilize the comic medium to narrate their experiences and the lives of the other women around them. Given the hybrid nature of graphic life narratives, which blend visual and textual storytelling, this research employs close reading, visual and textual narratology, and feminist literary criticism as its primary analytical tools. The central focus is to examine how women authors/ illustrators construct selfhood and gender identity and how they represent their lives and womanly experiences through the interplay of words and images. This study explores how these elements collectively shape the representation of personal and collective histories by analyzing similar patterns in the life stories women shared through their genre-bending works.

In this context, the primary aim of the research is to explore how Turkish female artists utilize graphic life narratives to express personal and collective experiences, and how, in doing so, they challenge and expand the traditional

Almas, E. (2021). Strangers in strange land: Jewish memories of Istanbul in the memoirs of Roni Margulies. *Life Writing*, 18(4), 513-525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2021.1928811>

boundaries of the autobiography and graphic novel genres. The study also addresses several secondary questions: How do these narratives construct discourses on gender, identity, experience, and self-perception? What role do familial female figures, such as mothers, grandmothers, and daughters, play in constructing collective memory and cultural identity within these narratives? How does producing these narratives in different languages (Turkish, English, German) contribute to a transnational expansion of Turkish literary and artistic traditions? In what ways do the graphic life narratives created by Turkish women incorporate feminist autoethnographic elements? Finally, how do these graphic narratives contribute to diversifying the representation of women in Turkish literature and graphic arts?

Chapter 1 explores the practice of “Writing a Life.” Primarily presenting the theoretical background of autobiography, this chapter lays out the definitions and the limits of the genre, incorporates the feminist critique into the theories of autobiography, and elaborates the reasons why *life narration* is preferable terminology for the thesis and feminist reading of women’s writings. This chapter also presents studies explicitly focused on Turkish literature and the history of women’s life narratives within the Turkish context.

Chapter 2 focuses on the practice of “Drawing a Life.” Building on the communicative nature of graphical narration, this chapter explores existing scholarly debates on defining comics, distinguishing graphic novels from comics, and examining the medium’s subversive potential in narrating life stories. The second chapter also presents the historical perspective of Turkish comics tradition and the discussions within the Turkish literary landscape.

Chapter 3 examines the examples of graphic life narratives produced by women in Türkiye through the main themes established based on the theories, critiques, and perspectives discussed in **Chapter 1**. The chapter begins with a brief introduction of Özge Samancı, Gökçe Yavaş Önal, Aslı Alpar, and Burcu Türker, and proceeds by analyzing how these artists narrate their stories, how they employ various drawing and graphic techniques to render genre boundaries more fluid, and how they present key aspects of the female experience in authentic ways. The analysis is supported by visual examples drawn from the works and further enriched by references to the artists' interviews, personal writings, and self-reflections, to engage with their narratives without detaching them from their voices. Lastly, as the final chapter, it offers the conclusions drawn from previous analysis.

This research aims to increase academic interest in graphic narratives within Turkish literature and enhance the visibility of female artists' life narratives. By highlighting the interaction between traditional literary genres and contemporary hybrid storytelling forms, it seeks to establish an interdisciplinary bridge between literature and visual arts. This comprehensive approach is expected to contribute to understanding the role of graphic life narratives in Türkiye's literary and artistic landscape while highlighting the significance of women's writings and their role in expanding feminist discourse and transnational literary readings.

CHAPTER I: Narrating the Life

This chapter will explore life narratives through the lens of autobiography, examining the early examples of this literary genre, its definitional efforts, critiques, and evolving perspectives. In addition, it will discuss the autobiography from a local perspective, shedding light on its development and various interpretations within Turkish literature. This chapter will address the questions of autobiography, its boundaries, and what kinds of limitations these boundaries impose. How can an autobiography be evaluated when considering women's narratives? How is the genre approached from a transnational perspective, and what transformations has it undergone through a feminist lens? Seeking answers to these questions will offer a path for understanding how the works analyzed in the thesis can be inclusively approached as "life narratives", which is central to this study, within the context of Turkish literary debates, and how women's graphic narratives can be integrated into these ongoing discussions. Therefore, tracing the development of these debates becomes crucial for a deeper analysis of the selected works.

1. What is Autobiography?

1.1 Acknowledging the Genre: The Roots

The practice of writing one's life story can be traced back to St. Augustine's *Confessions*, as many scholars suggest. Even though the term was interchangeably used to encompass the forms of "memoir," "confession," or "life essays," the 19th and 20th centuries highlighted the term autobiography as a distinct genre of self-

writing of one's own life. Embracing the genre, however, brings more questions than answers, not only to the literary sphere but also to the philosophical, historical, psychological, and political facets of presenting one's own life story to the knowledge of others.

The fundamental issues arise from the essential elements of the term: What does it mean *auto-bio-grape* that we are engaging? Which self are we looking for, or what is "the self" expressed? What makes the selves, or why do we need to state the proclaimed identity in such practice of writing? What do "I" mean to "others"? Why does my "self" matter to the "other selves"? How can "life" be remembered and portrayed uninterruptedly? How can the knowledge of my life be the knowledge of others? What is even "life" for each of us? Is the individual's life significant, or is it the experience we want to share? Why do we even turn our lives into a narration? Why do we write or text it? What do we want to mean, or do we mean to somebody?

Questions can and will go further; thus, this eclectic essence does not ease defining the notion indisputably. Defining the term is problematic since it resides "on the borderline between fact and fiction, the personal and the social, the popular and the academic, the everyday and the literary" (Coslett et al., 2000, p. 1). Although autobiography mostly connotes a literary form, those "borderlines" show its occupation of various disciplines. Narrated firsthand experiences, the past written by the present, and the memory that interprets historical and political contexts create an interplay between history and literature. Therefore, whether to approach the genre as a documented history or a constructed reality was the initial criticism to distinguish autobiography's authenticity compared to biography, letters, journals, or memoirs.

1.2. On the (Im)possibility of defining the genre: The Limits and Criticisms

It was important for the first critics of the autobiography to intermingle or extricate fact and fiction since it emphasizes analyzing the cultural and historical knowledge within self-life-writing and signifies the genre's legitimacy for the audience. For the pioneer critics of autobiography, such as Georges Gusdorf, for example, autobiography should be accepted as a literary form because it "is not a simple repetition of the past as it was, for recollection brings us not the past itself but only the presence in the spirit of a world forever gone" (Gusdorf, 1980, p. 38) as he argues in *Conditions and Limits of Autobiography*. In contrast, beyond describing it as an artistic genre, it's not a form but content for Albert E. Stone (Jelinek, 1986, p. 3). In addition, approaching autobiography solely with a literary or historical concern "would separate it from the writer's life and his personality" for James Olney since it's a process deeply connected to the human impulse to make sense of life, thus it is about how people naturally seek to organize their experiences and thoughts, influencing what they create and how they create it (2017, p. 3). Roy Pascal also differentiates the literary form of an autobiography from autobiographical content in *Design and Truth in Autobiography* since such practice is not a mere statement of life but a spiritual retrospective experiment an individual undergoes. Therefore, the life represented in the autobiography is the "voyage of discovering self," according to him (2016, p. 182).

Reading an author's true life (hi)story, on the other hand, is an essential assumption a reader has in mind, and it is what makes autobiography matter to autobiographers and their readers. Therefore, the reader's role in defining the genre is something to consider for the initial autobiography studies. Philippe Lejeune's

widely quoted essay *The Autobiographical Pact* underscores this crucial connection between the author, the text, and the reader as a foundation for studying autobiographical works in a theoretical framework. He defines autobiography as “A retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality.” (Lejeune, 1989, p. 4). Then, he argues, to name an autobiography, “the author, the narrator, and the protagonist should be recognized as identical” by the reader. (Lejeune, 1989, p. 5). Therefore, this mutual contract between the reader and author affirms an identity (constituted by author, narrator, and protagonist) for the author and guarantees the text’s authenticity for/by the reader. Unlike other mediums, a good autobiography stresses communication between the two parts: both predispose reading the truth about one’s life and writing to realize the self.

Not only Lejeune’s frequently used definition but many other trials of drawing borders of autobiography raised flags since chasing “the good” autobiography primarily centers (1) on the author, not others; (2) reflecting the “zeitgeist” of the time; (3) pursuing self-awareness and self-understanding; (4) aiming for exploration rather than persuasion while giving significance to the author’s “personal mythos” (Jelinek, 1986, p. 4). Even though Lejeune himself was discontented with the scope of the theory, some exclusions and essentialistic traits in this pioneer definition still occupy the current criticism. Is prose the only form we expect from an autobiography? Then, what is the place for poems or contemporary forms like photography, cinema, or graphical works? What are the integral parts of an identity reflected in autobiography? Who is the subject or object in narration? Why only engage in self-existence and retrospective personal life? Isn’t there any possibility of voicing and accounting for one another?

2. Women and Autobiography:

2.1 Feminist dissent in defining the genre: What is different?

The complexities of the definition of reaching true autobiography aside, as many scholars, theorists, and critics agree, one of the predominant lacks of studies on autobiography is the untouched terrains of women's writings. From deciding the first examples of the genre to canonizing 'the' autobiographies, women's writings, and their not-so-proper "diurnal" and "non-retrospective" works, like diaries, letters, or memoirs, mostly excluded from the "Great Men" tradition (Marcus, 1994, p. 1). As many feminist scholars in the field argue, there were the fathers of the genre: St. Augustine, Rousseau, Montaigne, Goethe, Barthes (...), and their "myths" of identities, their "voyages" of selves, their histories of the world and their ways to expressing it, for understanding fundamentals of the genre.

The academic interest in women's autobiographical practices increased and was recognized as a field in the 1980s. There were three interconnected areas of activity: constructing an archive of women's writing, claiming models of heroic identity, and revising conventional theories of autobiography (Smith & Watson, 1998, p. 5). Some pioneer studies analyzed women's autobiographical works and tried to discover what aspects can expand and alter the male-dominant understanding of autobiography. To start investigating, a search in the history of women's autobiographies was critical. A skeleton canon was laid out in 1979 by Mary G. Mason and Carol Hurd Green's *Journeys: Autobiographical Writings by Women*. Mason's introduction laid the history of women's autobiographies and presented the

so-called “mothers” of the genre: Margaret Cavendish, Anne Bradstreet, Margery Kempe, and Julian of Norwich (Mason & Green, 1979).⁶

The collected essays in *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, edited by Estelle C. Jelinek, discussed various works of women to invite studies to expand the autobiographical canon or establish a new canon devoted to women’s writings. Jelinek wielded considerable influence in the field by comparing and contrasting the autobiographical works of men and women. Jelinek identifies notable differences in the content, narrative style, and temporality of men’s and women’s life stories. While men tend to emphasize professional achievements and present themselves as historically significant through linear, coherent storytelling, women often focus on domestic and relational aspects, using fragmented and introspective narratives to explore personal meaning and authenticity. (Smith & Watson, 1998, p. 9). Moreover, in *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography* Estelle C. Jelinek also claims the presence of distinctive textual practices of women in autobiographical writing stating that “I am not arguing for ‘better’ (or ‘worse’), but for different” (1986, p. xii), by analyzing historical and contemporary examples of English and American works. Domna Stanton, in *The Female Autograph*, also highlights the distinctiveness and significance of the female autobiographical tradition by coining a new term of *autogynography* (life writing through self-representation) to emphasize the importance of recognizing and analyzing women’s voices within the broader literary landscape, as in difference in women’s subjectivities and their marginalized forms of autobiographical practices (Stanton, 1987)

⁶ Among the prominent figures frequently referenced in critical and theoretical studies focusing on women’s autobiographies, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir can be considered as another foundational “mothers” of the field.

Comparing and differentiating becomes an initial method of the feminist study of autobiography, and the core goal is to reclaim female agency against the “Great Men” tradition. Therefore, criticism embodied an approach of differentiating in explaining women’s autobiographies. Of course, there are distinguishable patterns between the autobiographies of women and men since “when we write of a woman, everything is out of place,” as Woolf wrote in *Orlando* (2018, p. 176). However, this feminist view promptly highlights two primary inquiries: How can women as the subject of autobiography change the studies of autobiography, and what difference does this cause in the theories?

2.2. Theories of Relationality: The Female Subject and the “Others.”

Firstly, the ongoing Romantic understanding of self (*authos*) connotes a male-white-Western subject and often asserts a transcendental self, a universal human, unified subject, while approaching the practice of life-writing (*bio-graphein*) is discovering the self, magnifying or validating the life lived uninterruptedly and retrospectively in the forms of distinct prose narratives (see, e.g., Jelinek, 1986; Brodzki & Schenck, 1988; Marcus, 1994; Smith & Watson, 1998; Coslett et al., 2000; Anderson, 2001). Thus, pointing out a difference in these traditional accounts challenges all established notions within the genre since the fundamentals of autobiography were “based on the ideals of autonomy, self-realization, authenticity, and transcendence which reflected their [men’s] own cultural values” (Anderson, 2001, p. 4). Secondly, defining autobiography according to the masculine modes of subjectivity and practices is crucial for further exploration of women’s works and possibly different theorization.

The theoretical concept of relationality was one of the first, yet still powerful, explanations for the uniqueness of the female tradition of writing. This approach enriches our understanding of women's identities, experiences, and narratives by examining the complexities of women's relationships and interconnectedness to the world they live in. In *The Other Voice*, Mary G. Mason initiated the arguments of the relational nature of women's subjectivity in autobiography. According to Mason, women's constitution of identity was a relational process rather than an individuating activity, as was assumed for autobiographic masculine subjects. She asserted, "The self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other.' [...] this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other seems to enable women to write openly about themselves." (Mason, 1980, p. 210). According to this assertion, women tend to accept one another's distinctiveness within self-in-relation rather than seeking autonomy in creating the self.

Later, Susan Stanford Friedman, in *Women's Autobiographical Selves*, contests the idea of separate and unique selfhood. A distinct theoretical lense for women's writing is profoundly necessary rather than placing women's writing as the other of the men's because such tendency "establishes a critical bias that leads to the (mis)reading and marginalization of autobiographical texts by women and minorities in the processes of canon formation." (Friedman, 1988, p. 34). Friedman further expands on the interconnectedness of female subjects by suggesting that "the self-created in a woman's text is often not a 'teleological entity,' an 'isolate being' utterly separate from all others" (1988, p. 40). Identity formation does not imply a

predetermined outcome as a sovereignty of a unified self; contrarily, it intertwines with relationships and interactions. Women possess a process of creating identity, which is dynamic and fluid, constantly influenced and shaped by the social environment. Thus, in their autobiographical selves, too, “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (1956, p. 273), as Beauvoir asserted in *The Second Sex*.

The absolutism of coherent self versus relationality of collective self, however, not only implies the differences in autobiographical accommodations of male and female subjects but also claims a relational understanding of identity for women; therefore, explaining the psychological phases of women’s identity formation played a pivotal role in the discussions of relationality. Nancy J. Chodorow’s psychoanalytic work on the sociology of gender, *The Reproduction of Mothering*, is widely referenced to explain how women construct their identity through developing an awareness of the self with respect to others. The influential arguments on mothering, mother-daughter relationships, and female psychology emphasized that the early identification process of a child contributes to the later development of selfhood and gender roles. Through social organizations, children primarily identify themselves with their parents; however, the different developmental experiences between boys and girls entail differences in modes of relationality, according to Chodorow.

“[...] growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. Boys come to define themselves as more separate and distinct, with a greater sense of rigid ego boundaries and differentiation. The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate” (Chodorow, 1979, p. 169).

While the construction of a masculine sense of self is in denial of relation and connection, this is what defines the feminine self for this approach. Therefore, by relating to one another intensely and dynamically, women's selfhood is not entirely isolated, both in constructing an identity in the societal realm and a relational self in autobiographical acts. As Mason and Friedman argue, analyzing autobiographical selves is a great indicator that shows us the interconnectedness of women's selfhood with the social and cultural context and the fluid nexus they create between self and others. Therefore, the "I" possesses not only "me" but "we" in women's autobiographies, and this is what needs attention for both getting to know why women narrate their lives and how they do this.

These groundbreaking feminist works challenge traditional views of autonomous selfhood that emphasize the separation of identities; they also underscore the importance of understanding women's subjectivity within a relational framework, where identity emerges through interactions with others and is continually shaped by social, cultural, and historical factors. Accordingly, interpreting the representations of women other than the protagonists in the works under study, as well as the life stories unfolding around them, becomes essential for examining how these women assert themselves as subjects within their own narratives and how they construct and negotiate this subjectivity through their interactions with the women surrounding them.

2.3. The Paradox of Gender Essentialism:

Even though turning attention to women's distinct and different autobiographical traditions and subjectivities calls for a departure from the early framework of the genre, escaping from the alienated autonomy of essentialized men

also reaches us to the end of essentialized women and narrations by women.

Approaching women's experiences "as the true feminist 'content' of women's autobiography and the transparent 'expression' of their lives" risks oversimplifying women's diverse experiences by pointing out universalized ideas about women and their narratives (Smith & Watson, 2016, p. 15). This, therefore, prompts us to reconsider the subjectivity of women's identities: Does the individual "I" really conceal a collective "we" within women's selfhood? Moreover, if so, who constitutes this "we"? Do we all share identical life experiences or narration practices, or is there diversity among us?

Questioning the hegemony of Western feminism underscores the problematic understanding of fixed womanhood and femininity for many Postmodern and Postcolonial critics. Whether Chandra T. Mohanty's influential critique, *Under Western Eyes*, rejects homogenizing the lives and oppression of "Third-world women" or Audre Lorde's poignant reminder of recognizing the differences of race, sexuality, class, and age to understand women worldwide in her speech *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House*, criticism toward the homogeneous female agent emerged within feminist critique. For autobiography studies as well, an "authentic voice of woman cannot be designated; the diversity of women's voices cannot be reduced to one (Long, 1999, p. 57). Therefore, this recognition of heterogeneity in women's lives dispels the notions that difference can be reduced to mere sexual denominators and necessitates cross-cultural studies. The Turkish context becomes particularly relevant at this point to avoid gender essentialism. In particular, artists such as Özge Samancı and Burcu Türker, who are of Turkish heritage and narrate their experiences within Turkish family life before publishing their works in foreign languages and abroad, make it difficult to assign a fixed

definition to their experiences, stories, or expressions of womanhood. For this reason, approaching the study from both a gender-focused and a transnational perspective gains significance.

In effect, some studies gather great attention from the field, not only because they underline cultural, racial, and historical diversity in women's becomings but also because they bring women's fruitful narrational forms to light for further understanding the genre. Françoise Lionnet, for example, argues for such variety in an intercultural context in *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture*. By introducing the concept of *métissage*, she emphasizes how historically marginalized subjects, like women of color and colonized people, produce subversive forms and narratives reflecting their cultural contexts through a dialogic interplay of multiple voices (Lionnet, 1991). This intercultural and postcolonial approach also facilitates expanding women's autobiographical textuality, as highlighted in the collection *In Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck. In this collection, while Doris Sommer argues the presence of plural subjects and the representative autoethnographic narration of Latin American women's *testimonios*, Celeste Schenck emphasizes the coextensive reading of poetries and autobiographical narrations of women as a challenge to hegemonic theories of autobiography. In addition, Catherine Portuges draws attention to cinematographic life narrations of women directors, and Mary Lowenthal Felstiner analyses Charlotte Salomon's painted self-portraits as a subversive autobiographic women's narration (Brodzki & Schenck, 1988).

In addition, some studies also doubt the theories of relationality that are solely attributed to women's autobiographies. The essays of Nancy K. Miller's *Representing Other* and Paul John Eakin's *Relational Selves, Relational Lives* argue

that the intersubjective aspect of social life and interdependency between the human beings as a common feature in the individuation processes of people, which in essence makes “identity necessarily relational” (Eakin, 1999, p. 52). These views may promptly encourage us to think twice about the relationality of woman selfhood as an exceptional feature, but disclose how studies have embodied a binary understanding of gender so far. Here, in the light of many postmodern studies’ adoptions (see, e.g., Smith, 1995; Eakin, 1999; Prosser, 1998; Watson, 2008), admitting gender as a performative act, as Judith Butler argues *In Gender Trouble*, entails rejecting any essentialist views of selfhood with highlighting how social norms, cultural discourses, and human connections construct fluid and interconnected nature of identities.

Moreover, being in-relation-to another not only explores the developmental process of selfhood and the production of a “gender matrix” (Butler, 1999, p. 23) within society but also emphasizes the sociopolitical dynamics of identity formation in narrating life experiences. Therefore, accepting identity as continually shaped and reshaped within the social and public sphere encourages political analysis of narrations of the independence and interdependence between the subjects and objects of auto/biographical stories, especially for feminist critique. Thus, this will be further explored in Chapter 3 through the lens of mother-daughter and sisterly relationships, as well as intergenerational family narratives.

2.4. Politics of Private Lives:

“Personal is Political” has been cherished as the predominant motto of Feminist criticism for a long time. Indeed, where private becomes public also resides at the core of self-life-writing. For early studies of such acts, women’s “private” life

or “personal” experience was often connoted to an untouchable *feminine mystique*; a story must be kept to self, or a practice must be kept to man. However, whatever the purpose behind it, sharing the personal with an audience creates a space where life is no longer secret and unknown but public and knowable. Especially for those oppressed in many ways throughout history, the literary space narrating the individual life experiences opens, therefore, requires a more complex reading of women’s narratives and further arguments of women’s becomings.

Reflecting on the relational nature of womanhood, it seems impossible to rule out “other” from the equation of female identity. This “otherness,” however, should be confined to Beauvoir’s “other sex” as an inferior, counter, or subordinate of the male sex, but also as other female selves that mutually recognized and coexisted. Alternatively, as Meyer asserts, mere identification with others does not lead to a genuine understanding of distinct experiences; proper recognition involves appreciating commonalities amidst differences, which is possible through balancing independence and interdependence, an endeavor inherently unique for both male and female self. (1999, p. 103). Therefore, recognizing the likeness and distinctiveness of each other and relating these shared but different experiences facilitates the “co-constitution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity” (Meyer, 1999, p. 103) in women’s self-referential works.

The co-existence of subjects implies creating a sense of identity and connectivity among women, as Judith Butler remarkably explains in *Precarious Life*: “For if I am confounded by you, then you are already of me, and I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the “we” except by finding the way in which I am tied to “you” (2004, p. 49). Especially “since she is reminded at every turn that she belongs to a group called women whose life, boundaries and identity have been

decided by the prevailing cultural attitudes, beliefs and values,” women’s self-construction involves an awareness of each other, suggesting that they are never entirely emancipated by other selves or others’ life experiences (Şulha, 2010). A continuous interplay between the lives and identities of women, in turn, underscores the importance of reading women’s becomings and their comings-to-voices through a political lens, as it enhances our understanding of their expressions and experiences within broader societal and power structures. Therefore, the articulation of women’s life experiences in the examples compiled in this thesis can be interpreted not only as personal narratives but also as political statements.

In her famous essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, Hélène Cixous eagerly encourages women to write their experiences: “[...] write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies –for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal” (p. 875). Women’s writing about themselves and their experiences in social settings inevitably embodies intervention in the public, which challenges the patriarchal understanding of the world and the structuring of society (see Evans et al., 2014). Thus, where personal becomes political resides very between the lines of autobiographical practices since it secures “knowledge about women’s collective situation, daily lives, and consciousness, information that is not to be found in other documents” (Long, 1999, p. 7). However, looking back to criticism against creating essentialized women by differentiating, acquiring knowledge through the assumption of a common womanhood experience would work only for accepting shared experiences as fundamental sources of knowledge and narrowing down the “personal is political” to a particular class of identity; white, middle-class, European-American, heterosexual women.

To escape from the restraint of the notion of universally shared experience and essential gender distinctions, we can refer to Joan W. Scott's remarkable essay "*Experience*," where she defines experience as a process. Referring to the analysis of Teresa de Lauretis (in *Alice Doesn't*), Scott asserts that experience is a process of becoming a subject since a person necessarily positions himself/herself in society depending on the identities influenced by material, cultural, political, and economic relations. (1992, p. 25). That is why "It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience" (Scott, 1992, p. 26). In fact, discussing experience as a process leads to perceiving individuals by their existence and overlooking how categories of gender, race, and sexuality form notions of their selves and identities. (Scott, 1992, p. 27). While we can escape from discussing our beings with the social labels attached to us, we can also acknowledge the role of power structures that surround us. Therefore, with the approach of "experience predating subject" (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 31), we can reduce the boundaries of dichotomies between gender, class, race, and sexuality to focus more on the impacts of experiences in relational lives.

Intersubjectivity and the relational nature of identity formation are, however, still crucial for autobiographical selves, both for analyzing self-life representations and their accommodation in the societal space and for narrating life. As argued in *Feminism and Autobiography*, intersubjectivity is "a term with at least a two-fold meaning," referring both "to the relationship between personal narratives and the public stories" and "to the relationship between the narrator and the audience" (Coslett et al., 2000, p. 3). Accepting the relational base of all identity formation processes via experiencing the world around us (as Miller, 1994; Eakin, 1999; Egan, 1999 argues), what is remarkable for the studies of autobiography is the

repercussions of the intersubjective relationship between subject, author, and audience in the production of the narration.

Acknowledging the presence of others and their contributions to our lives prevails acceptance of others as an integral part of the narrations about our lives, making the autobiographical narrative a relational story. Within this framework, “we are all subjects and readers and narrators” (1999, p. 6), as Judy Long suggests in *Telling Women’s Lives*. Furthermore, this relational bond between identities occurs predominantly in the narrations of self and life referent, which not only makes narration “the autobiography of the self but the biography and the autobiography of the other” (1999, p. 58) as P. John Eakin points out in *Relational Selves, Relational Lives*. Even though literary criticisms toward the author’s authority emerge from the merging of subject, narrator, and audience, it is crucial to reassert the “fluid boundaries” in women’s writings, particularly as feminist theorists of women’s autobiography underline it. The flexible understanding of both identity and the act of narration is excellent proof of the unorthodoxy of form in women’s narrations. Furthermore, the reason behind this is self-explanatory for Judy Long:

“Each of us has a life history, acts as an audience for others’ life stories, and actively elicits them. Each of us reads, in part, to know another’s reality. As subjects we struggle to express our subjectivity; as readers we resonate with records women have made of their lives. As narrators, we are inspired to rescue other women’s lives from obscurity, to enthrone them in history, and in so doing to preserve the link between women’s lives” (1999, p. 6).

As readers and authors, this close-knit relationship among women displays subversive characteristics of women’s narrations, even making feminist critics discuss the borders between biography and autobiography. Starting from the

epistemological gains of women's intersubjectivity (see Evans et al., 2014), influential studies, like *Investigating Subjectivity* by Carolyn Ellis and Michael G. Flaherty, suggest that the self-reflexive presence of the narrator in writing and researching the stories of women is inevitable. According to these studies, when researching a woman to acquire knowledge and write a biography about her, it is almost impossible to omit the sociocultural, familial, and political background of female researchers to the work, which reveals a fluid boundary between the object and subject of study (Ellis & Flaherty, 1992). Therefore, "the telling of life stories in response to a researcher's enquiries is not a simple one-way process, but involves a set of relationships all of which are pervaded by gender" (Summerfield, 1998, p. 2). Overall, when stories happen to include family histories (of migration, war, trauma), the presence of generations of family members (like mothers, sisters, daughters, aunts), and even the incorporation of the narrator's presence into the story (as both teller and protagonist) the Lejeunean "pact" between author and audience fades away and makes the relationship more complex.

Particularly, the intersubjective perspective on experience becomes crucial for understanding the narratives that highlight universal female dynamics within family, society, and identity, such as Aslı Alpar's work, in which she gives voice to the oppressive experiences of her grandmother; Gökçe Yavaş Önal's depiction of pregnancy and childbirth as a shared female experience; Burcu Türker's portrayal of mourning following the death of her mother; and Özge Samancı's portrayal of a young girl trying to discover herself. As will be discussed later in this study, with their works, women articulate not only their own experiences of womanhood but also those of others, making visible the co-constitution of relational subjectivities, narrating the process of becoming through experience. By blurring the boundaries

between author, narrator, and reader, and embracing hybridity in narrative forms, they reveal the distinctive originality of women's writing through the act of narrating such intersubjectivity. Hence, they suggest fluidity over duality to grasp gender identities and experiences in the public sphere as multifaceted. This underscores their unique existence within the literary landscape marked by distinct content, form, and plot traditions, "highlighting the subversive and emancipatory potential of women's autobiography for the genre as a whole" (Long, 1999, p. 57).

Arguing the differences between gendered traditions and gendered practices and experiences of lives opens a valuable space for emphasizing the politics of sharing life experiences and the subversive characteristics of narrating them. The underlined "differences" spur many new discussions and explanations, yet the relational mode of reading women's coming-to-voices remains as substantial today. These differences may also embrace diversity in forms; however, the reason may reside not only in gender problems but also in the evolution of narration practices. Therefore, approaching the phenomena of "autobiography" broadly and inclusively may, indeed, be necessary.

3. "Autobiography" or "Life Narrative"

From the 1990s onward, questioning the practices of universalizing limits, scope, and traditions of autobiography brought new theoretical challenges to the field. Owing to feminist studies, examining the fundamentals of genre, notions of the self, narration practices, and politics of life experiences took a substantial place in criticisms of autobiography. Firstly, the interest in stating the distinctiveness of women's autobiographies and establishing archives for them increased; then, the

differences and power asymmetries among women and their narration practices were recognized. The complex and fluid approach to gender brought fresh blood to the scene. Yet, the complexities and contradictions of life experiences opened the debates on the relationship between bodies, gender, and sexualities. And, in the realm of life referential writing, recognition of the plurality in lives brought new practices of narrating life, which expanded the limits of autobiography as a fixed genre with increasing attention given to diverse forms of contemporary life narratives, such as photographs, films, ethnographic studies, and various forms of visual art. (Smith & Watson, 2009, p. 14)

The traditional distinction of the genre was for differentiating autobiography from memoirs, diaries, and journals. However, subversive practices of genre-bending in contemporary art forms and digitalization of expression suggest analyzing autobiography from a broader perspective by encompassing literary and cultural studies, media studies, and communication studies. Just as identities and politics of experience have become more diverse, as discussed earlier, so too have the genres of autobiographical expression. To express the flux of forms, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* (2002), present hybrid (visual and textual) and subversive modes of autobiographical productions of women, such as photography, dance, theatre, sculpture, and more. The second edition of their influential work, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010), also lists sixty genres of life narratives (and many more sub-genres), including recent forms of autoethnography, autofiction, autographics, ecobiography, and autotopography. On the other hand, their latest edition, *Reading Autobiography Now* (2024), addresses globally emerging practices from graphical narrations, films, and performances to digital practices.

In light of this proliferation, referring to and defining autobiography as a fixed and solid genre is unfair to this fruitful narrative and expressive space. Therefore, this study aims to refer to Smith and Watson's suggested terms of "life writing" and "life narration" to be more inclusive of all heterogeneous life referential practices.

"We understand life writing as a general term for writing that takes a life, one's own or another's, as its subject. Such writing can be biographical, novelistic, historical, or explicitly self-referential and, therefore, autobiographical. The autobiographical mode of life writing might more precisely be called *self life writing*, but we employ this phrase only for occasional emphasis because of its clumsiness. Both memoir and autobiography are encompassed in the term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer's life as their subject, whether written, performative visual, filmic, or digital. In other words, we employ the term *life writing* for forms of the autobiographical, and *life narrative* to refer to autobiographical acts of any sort." (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 4)

With these new terms, however, it is difficult to "deny generic distinctions," as G. Thomas Couser argues in *Genre Matters*, yet it clearly "reflects an impulse toward Catholicity and reconsideration of traditional definitions and distinctions" (2005, p. 142). This study also highlights the theories and critiques of autobiography's limitations and complexities, but still notes the provocative potential of contemporary modes of expression and recognizes the space this potential expands. From a feminist perspective, the term "life narration" is liberating for interdisciplinary analysis, as it highlights the diverse narrative practices and experiences of identities that utilize making politics of private lives. Consequently,

this study will employ life narration to analyze the graphical self-referential expressions of women authors to enable a more comprehensive and inclusive examination.

4. Introduction to Women's Life Narrations in Turkish Literature:

First, it is crucial to highlight that, much like in other parts of the world, texts authored by women remain relatively scarce in Turkish literature. While it is challenging to present life narratives from the Ottoman Empire as autobiographical examples in the Western sense, it is also difficult to draw a sharp line between genres such as memoir, letter, and diary that are more commonly seen in the Turkish context. In modern Turkish literature, autobiographical studies have generally addressed themes of gender, identity, history, and individuality. However, while this genre has been studied more widely and in-depth in Western literature, studies on autobiography in Turkish literature have been substantially limited.

In one of the most critical studies in the Turkish context, Nazan Aksoy's book, *Kurgulanmış Benlikler* (2009), discusses the identity of women based on the nation-state understanding of the society that changed under the influence of the modernization process in the first examples of women's autobiographies. According to Aksoy, the women's world became more visible in the transition from community to individuality within the framework of the Modernization Project, making the period crucial in understanding the life narratives of Turkish women who moved from the private sphere to the public sphere. This period symbolizes the process of the formation of a new nation and identity since the deep-rooted structure of the traditional Ottoman Empire weakened and underwent transformation or reform, in

which the foundations of modern or Western Turkish society were laid. (Aksoy, 2009)

However, before addressing this identity issue, we should initially take a look at the life narratives of upper-class women living in the traditional Ottoman society, especially in the palace and its surroundings, and the lives of the women of the society they witnessed so that the transition from the Ottoman period to the modern period could be presented better. Later, we can focus on constructing women's identity in the nation-building process and contemporary women's narratives in a sequence within the framework of women's life narratives in Turkish literature.

4.1. Ottoman Period: The First Examples of Women's Life Narratives

The communal structure of Ottoman society makes it unlikely that we will see examples of the genre of autobiography in that period, which is closely associated with individuality in the West. However, this does not mean that a literary genre that describes the personal world, an individual voice independent from society and private life, did not exist in the Ottoman Empire, nor does it indicate the complete absence of personal narratives. Ottoman intellectuals or members of upper-class society left personal records written much before the Westernization process. On the other hand, it is pretty difficult to interpret how much of the life narratives in the Ottoman Empire progressed with individuality in Europe before the autobiography tradition was introduced. (Aksoy, 2009, p. 67).

It is commonly accepted that early autobiography examples in Turkish literature include letters, memoirs, and diaries. These genres are not clearly

distinguished from autobiography but contain autobiographical features. For example, the “Dream Journals” (1641-1643) belonging to Asiye Hatun from Üsküp are considered the earliest life narrations written by a woman (Gökalp Alpaslan, 2015; Aksoy, 2009). The diaries and the essay titled *Mukadderat* by Nigâr Hanım, one of the leading female poets of the 19th century, present another early example of women’s life narratives in Turkish literature (Gökalp Alpaslan, 2015, p. 148). The memoirs of women living in the elite class in and around the Ottoman palace also provide important information about the women’s world of the period. Melek Hanım’s work *Thirty Years in the Harem* (1872), which sheds light on the social and emotional lives of women in the palace after she became a Muslim, and *Six Years in Europe: Sequel to Thirty Years in the Harem* (1873), in which she recounts her experiences after fleeing to Europe, are valuable sources in terms of women’s life narratives (Lewis & Micklewright, 2006, pp. 110-111). Another essential name who witnessed palace life was Leyla (Saz) Hanım, since she was educated with the daughters of Sultan Abdülmecid. Her life story, which describes the daily functioning of the palace, its traditions, and the etiquette that the women of the palace had to follow, was published in a Turkish newspaper serially in the early 1920s and then published in French in 1925 under the title *The Imperial Harem of the Sultans* (Lewis & Micklewright, 2006, p. 175).

4.2. From Empire to Republic: Modernization Project and Nation-Building

Autobiographical writing in the Western sense remained largely absent in Ottoman literature, as the life narratives produced from the late 19th to early 20th centuries often lacked clear genre distinctions. The Modernization (or

westernization) movements that began with the Tanzimat influenced literary forms, yet modern autobiographies in Turkish literature only began to emerge with the early 20th century transition from empire to republic. Gökalp Alpaslan notes that many autobiographical works by women during this period were published long after they were written and typically covered only select portions of life, preventing them from being considered full autobiographies. She attributes this to several cultural factors: individuals' introverted lives, privacy concerns, Islamic fatalism, and the association of writing with high culture (Gökalp Alpaslan, 2016, p. 52). Similarly, Nazan Aksoy argues that the delayed development of autobiography in Turkish literature stems from a lack of a strong written culture, where personal experiences were traditionally shared orally rather than recorded. Additionally, fears of state or societal pressure discouraged individuals from writing openly about their private lives, reinforcing concerns about confidentiality and a desire to protect family privacy (Aksoy, 2009, p. 73). Taken together, these factors reflect the late emergence of individualism in Türkiye, which significantly limited the spread and acceptance of autobiographical writing.

By the dawn of the 20th century, modernization became a central concern for the declining Ottoman Empire, aiming not only to reform its political and administrative structures but also to reshape its social and cultural fabric. As society grappled with tensions between tradition and modernity and encountered Western individualism, women, once confined to the private sphere, began entering public life, marking one of the most visible and symbolic shifts of the modernization project. As Nazan Aksoy argues, to fully understand women's autobiographies in Turkish literature, it is crucial to examine the place, role, and contributions of women in the context of modernization, societal transformation, and the search for a new

national identity. This was because, during the nation-building process aimed at shaping a modern identity, integrating women into political and economic life was seen as essential. Women's increasing visibility in the public sphere, through participation in the national struggle and economic production, underscored their importance to the modernization project. Yet, their inclusion did not equate to full emancipation. Although the early Republic introduced notable advancements in women's rights, these were primarily state-led reforms framed not as individual freedoms but as contributions to collective national progress. Thus, while women entered public life, patriarchal norms persisted in the private sphere. In this context, how women internalized and responded to modernization becomes essential to understanding autobiographical narratives in Turkish literature (Aksoy, 2009, p. 73-75).

The importance that Halide Edip, the first writer who comes to mind in modern female autobiography, attributes to the "Turkish woman" identity is quite apparent. Her works, *Memoirs of Halide Edip* (London, 1926) and *The Turkish Ordeal* (1928); *Türk'ün Ateşle İmtihanı* (1962); *Mor Salkımlı Ev* (1963), tell the story of a woman living in a society trying to transition from an empire to a nation-state and facing wars. The image of a woman who is patriotic, active in the national struggle, and respectful of national values is reflected in the autobiographical and fictional characters in Halide Edip's novels, and she frequently emphasizes the identity of the "ideal woman" of the newly formed nation. (Adak, 2004, p. 163). While Halide Edip's autobiographies and autobiographical fiction reveal the impact of Turkish modernization on a woman's social identity, her avoidance of expressing the details of her private life shows us a woman's narrative that becomes public as a requirement of national identity (Aksoy, 2009, p. 92).

Following Halide Edip, Sabiha Sertel's autobiography *Roman Gibi* (1969) also highlights women's roles, ideals, and struggles in a society undergoing modernization; only while Edip has a nationalist ideology does Sertel come to the fore with her socialist views. Through her published writings, Sertel advocated for women's legal rights, defended gender equality, and remained acutely aware of women's issues in a nation trying to redefine itself. Sociopolitical issues and the visibility of women in the public sphere took precedence over private life, and like Halide Edip, Sertel kept her personal life in the background to focus on broader social narratives (Aksoy, 2009, p. 101-103).

Yet the more intimate dimensions of Sertel's life, and of late Ottoman Sabbatian women more broadly, are revealed through a layered, intergenerational lens. Her autobiography, when read alongside *Annem* (1994), the biographical work later written by her daughter Yıldız Sertel, constitutes a rare example of intergenerational storytelling that brings to light the often-erased private histories of women in Sabbatian communities (Samet & Almas, 2025, p. 229). This form of storytelling, passed between mother and daughter, reconstructs a gendered historical archive that challenges dominant nationalist narratives. Importantly, these life stories unfold not only across generations but also across borders, from the Ottoman Empire to Republican Turkey, and into transnational spaces of exile. The Sertel memoirs thus exemplify how intergenerational life writing becomes a political act, inscribing women's voices into both familial memory and broader historical discourse (Samet & Almas, 2025, p. 240-241).

Transitioning from the multicultural, multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and deeply rooted Ottoman Empire to a nation-state unified by a shared flag, language, religion, and nationality was not received uniformly across all segments of society. Some

autobiographies from this transformative period reveal alternative perspectives on constructing women's public identities, underlining how women with diverse life experiences perceived the dominant political climate. For instance, Samiha Ayverdi's *Bir Dünyadan Bir Başka Dünyaya* (1974) and Zabel Yesayan's *Silahtar Bahçeleri* (1935), in which they recount their family lives, their household agendas, and the environment they lived offer unique perspectives on how they made sense of the world in their childhoods and provide alternative viewpoints on the constructed identity of women. By narrating her experience as a woman drawn to Sufism within a family where tensions between the traditional and the modern were apparent, Ayverdi creates a voice of a woman who values Ottoman traditions and spirituality and resists their complete abandonment in the name of modernization (Aksoy, 2009, p. 104). Meanwhile, Yesayan, whose works are often categorized within Armenian literature, offers alternative insights into national female identity. She writes in Armenian, reflects on her Armenian neighborhood, her family, and the non-Muslim community they lived in, shedding light on the private and public lives of minority women during the Ottoman Empire's transition to a nation-state (Adak & Altınay, 2010, p. 18-19).

Alternatively, when we adopt a broader perspective on women who became more visible in the public sphere through modernization, and on the narratives in which they describe, portray, and express themselves, we also witness the emergence of women who began to represent themselves not only through written but also visual forms of expression. This approach encourages us to prioritize women's life stories over rigid genre classifications, allowing for richer interpretations of their lives and thoughts. The Modernization, as a pivotal moment of increased female visibility, thus becomes especially significant for understanding how women

engaged in acts of self-representation during a time of profound social transformation. (Küçükşen Öner, 2022, p. 141). In this context, the range of “mediators” narrating women’s lives also expands significantly. Female artists who produced self-portraits in Turkish painting are especially noteworthy, as they illustrate how women positioned themselves as the subjects of their narratives and provide historical insight into the development of female self-representation. Therefore, in this section, it is pertinent to not only discuss women who narrated their lives through writing but also to acknowledge women who expressed themselves through self-portraiture. Artists such as Mihri (Müşfik) Hanım (1886), Müfide Kadri (1890), Fahrünnisa Zeyd (1901), Hale Asaf (1905), Eren Eyüboğlu (1913), Leyla Gamsız Sarptürk (1921), Neş'e Erdok (1940), and Nur Koçak (1941) stand out as pioneering figures who should be recognized in this regard.

4.3. Proliferation of Life Narrations

Women’s autobiographies continued to increase in number after the establishment of the republic. Private lives become more visible, and women’s efforts to discover themselves and make sense of their lives become more evident in later examples. The writers who witnessed the transition from the Empire to the Republic or spent their childhood experiencing the effects of the newly established Republic on women published their life stories later, usually in the second half of the 20th century. One of these women, Halide Nusret Zorlutuna, in *Bir Devrin Romani*’nında (1973), on the one hand, displays a conservative, nationalist, ideal Turkish woman identity, while on the other hand, she wants to share the difficulties and pressures she faced in her life as a female teacher, poet and writer who wants to gain a respected place for herself in the public sphere (Aksoy, 2009, pp. 116-117).

Cahide Üçok also published her work *Erkekler Dünyasında Bir Kadın Yazar* (2003) under the pen name Cahit Uçuk, believing that she would be more easily accepted in the literary world with a male name. Despite sharing her private life with the reader, she exhibited a genderless attitude to be respected as a woman writer in a world of men (Aksoy, 2009, pp. 132-133). In İsmet Kür's autobiography *Yarısı Roman* (1995), it is more observable that women's private and public lives are not separated. In the work, Kür criticizes the problems women experience in society from the perspective of her own life. (Aksoy, 2009, p. 135-136).

The works published in the late 20th and 21st centuries have diversified, and the hybridity of genres has increased. Among these, "autofiction" works tell women's life stories hidden behind fictional characters; Sevgi Soysal's *Yıldırım Bölge Kadın Koğuşu* (1976), Duygu Asena's *Kadının Adı Yok* (1987) and Adalet Ağaoğlu's *Göç Temizliği* (1984) are outstanding examples. Moreover, life story narratives created through conversations named "river interviews" have also been published. For example, Fulya Atacan's *Hayatımda Hiç Arkaya Bakmadım: Mübeccel Kıray ile Söyleşi* (2001) and Feridun Andaç's *Sen Türkiye'nin En Güzel Kazası: Adalet Ağaoğlu Kitabı* (2000) are of this kind. In addition, life stories written by women from different segments of society with various professional groups, ideologies, and experiences have become increasingly visible. Among the life stories of women scientists, Mina Urgan's *Bir Dinozorun Anıları* (1998) and Arı İnan's *Prof. Dr. Afet İnan* (2005); among the life stories of artists, Nilgün Belgün's *İçimdeki Kadın* (2003) stand out. The life stories of teachers, civil society volunteers, women who have overcome terminal illnesses, and other influential women from diverse fields are gaining prominence in contemporary literature (Gökalp Alpaslan, 2015, p. 155-157).

In recent decades, expression of life narrations in Türkiye has diversified significantly, expanding beyond conventional autobiographies to include hybrid and experimental narrative forms. This evolution reflects a broader feminist impulse to explore personal histories through varied mediums that merge the visual, oral, and textual. Burcu Şimşek’s digital storytelling workshops exemplify this shift, demonstrating how Turkish women increasingly use new media to voice their experiences and build solidarity across differences. By combining oral storytelling traditions with digital and visual expression, Şimşek’s work resists the confines of traditional feminist discourse and affirms the power of micro-narratives in shaping a collective feminist memory (2017, p. 83). This transformation also parallels the rise of graphic life narratives that blur the boundaries between text and image. Ramize Erer’s *Kız Hikayeleri* (2013), Özge Samancı’s *Dare to Disappoint: Growing Up in Turkey* (2015), Burcu Türker’s *Tatlı Limonlar* (2016), Gökçe Yavaş Önal’s *İçimdeki Buhranlar* (2020) and *Anne Bak!* (2022), as well as Aslı Alpar’s *Emine Hanım’ın Romanı* (2020), all offer striking examples of the multiplicity of women’s life narratives in contemporary Türkiye. While some focus on themes of migration, education, and political oppression, others explore motherhood, inner turmoil, friendship, and intergenerational trauma. Therefore, whether digital or drawn, spoken or written, these works contribute to what Şimşek calls a “coalition of stories” (2017, p. 83) that challenge silencing structures and enrich the feminist archive with diverse, intimate, and politically charged perspectives.

CHAPTER II: Drawing the Life

This chapter will move from texted lives to illustrated life narratives. By examining the dynamics of storytelling through the intersection of text and image, it will explore the communicative power of visual narration, the nature of comics, and genre distinctions between comics and graphic novels. In addition to analyzing the definitional boundaries of genres and the critiques surrounding these limitations, this chapter will also elaborate on the concept of “graphic narrative,” which is central to this study. Furthermore, it will discuss its relationship with literary works, its development and status in Türkiye, and its significance in women’s life narrations.

1. Introduction to Graphic Narratives:

Stepping beyond the borders of Turkish literature and into the global literary landscape, we encounter a compelling and innovative form where women narrate their life stories through drawing and writing: Graphic narrations. Unlike life narratives in prose, where interpretation is driven by text alone, graphic narrations (graphic novels, graphic memoirs, or comic books and albums) utilize interaction between text and image, creating a hybrid space between literature and visual art and offering the reader a peculiar reading experience. By including graphic pictures in the story, the narrator can visually describe their experiences, bodies, emotions, and perspectives on the world while maintaining narrative integrity. Meanwhile, the audience also has a presence in the story through its interpretation of the mixture of image-text, the transitions of scenes, blanks within the pages, and representations of characters. Therefore, this interplay between text and image allows for layering, where visuals support the story, expand beyond words, and create spaces for

meaning, offering rich possibilities for feminist interpretation. Yet, before delving into analyzing women's graphic life narratives, which form the core of this study, initially, we need to take a look at the scope of graphic narratives, the debates surrounding genre distinctions, the relationship between graphic and life narratives, and the ways women have engaged with this form.

1.1. Words, Images, and Storytelling: Communication through Comics

While using images or combining visual and textual elements to tell life stories is far from a new domain, creating immersive, multifaceted narratives that engage the imagination and stimulate the senses through this blend of picture and text has evolved into what we now recognize as comics. This medium, as described by pioneering critic and artist Will Eisner, is a form of “sequential art” that fuses art and literature, functions as a distinct discipline, and “deals with the arrangement of pictures or images and words to narrate a story or dramatize an idea” (2000, p. 5). On the other hand, Scott McCloud, another key figure in comic theory, likens comics to a “vessel which can hold any number of ideas and images” (1994, p. 6). Expanding on this concept, Eisner emphasizes the unique communicative quality of comics, which provides readers with visuals directly rather than relying solely on text that requires mental translation into images. This dynamic blend of image and text offers a distinct reading that is rapid and unified, as it creates a form of language. Therefore, according to Eisner, “When this language is employed as a conveyance of ideas and information, it separates itself from mindless visual entertainment. This makes comics a storytelling medium.” (2008, p. 6-7).

Approaching comics as a distinct narrative medium that utilizes interplay between images and words highlights the role of the readers in its language. Thus, many critics do not neglect the reader's share of interpretation and engagement in making sense of this form of communication. While Will Eisner underscores the requisite for the reader "to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills" (2000, p. 10) when engaging with comics, Hillary L. Chute emphasizes reader's active participation in communication as they "fill in the gaps between panels" and "work with the often disjunctive back-and-forth of reading and looking for meaning." (2008, p. 452). Scott McCloud further describes the reciprocal relationship between creator and reader, highlighting how comics foster a unique interaction when generating meaning through this shared communicative process:

"The comics' creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and the unseen, the visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics. No other artform gives so much to its audience while asking so much from them as well. This is why I think it's a mistake to see comics as a mere hybrid of the graphic arts and prose fiction. What happens between these panels is a kind of magic only comics can create." (McCloud, 1994, p. 98)

Even though discussions on communication continue to evolve, it is essential to emphasize the dynamic space within the comics where the creator's message intersects with the audience's interpretation. Inviting readers both to derive meaning from sequences and to interpret the synergy of image-text interaction to affiliate them with the narrative enriches comics as a subject for literary analysis. Moreover, as many studies suggest, discussing the distinctions between comics and graphic novels is equally crucial. Examining this contentious issue allows for a more inclusive understanding of both forms under the broader concept of graphic

narration, setting the stage for a closer look at scholars' views on their unique characteristics.

1.2. From Comics to Graphic Novel: Debates on the Genre

Scott McCloud, in his seminal work *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, defines the medium of comics as “Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (1993, p. 9). Although this definition is broad enough to encompass various genres proliferated after/by comics, some distinguishable characteristics, especially regarding publication requirements and market categorization, have also been underlined for clarity. For Roger Sabin, for example, comics “is a publication in booklet, tabloid, magazine or book form that includes as a major feature the presence of one or more strips. Comics are usually published regularly (weekly, monthly, occasionally quarterly) and are generally cheap in order to be accessible to the widest possible audience” (2003, p. 5).

Nevertheless, such genre-specific categorization paved the way for comparing and differentiating comics and graphic novels, which inevitably became a contentious issue among scholars. The key distinctions standing out in the studies can be listed as such: (1) graphic novels generally intend to reach older audiences, while comics are often appealing to youngsters; (2) graphic novel is taken as mature and profitable publications by the market to be released in book format rather than serialized in newspapers, periodicals or magazines like comics; (3) graphic novel contains literary themes, sophisticated artwork, and a complete story, comparing

childish concepts associated with comics. (e.g. Sabin, 2003; Eisner, 2008; Murray, 2024).

While the primary reason behind the distinction is argued as a “marketing strategy” to create a place for graphic novels for some critics (e.g., Chute & DeKoven, 2006; Yalçinkaya, 2016), Eisner addresses skepticism among literary critics who questioned whether comics are suitable for covering “serious themes,” with praising new creative talents who increasingly issues mature subjects, such as “autobiography, social protest, reality-based human relationships, and history,” in their works, which prevails a climate for the medium’s broader acceptance (2008, p. xvii). Roger Sabin, on the other hand, acknowledges the existence of serious or mature subjects in the underground comics and refers to them as “adult comics” rather than graphic novels since it is merely “a new name for an old concept” (2003, p. 86).

The debate on ‘adult versus childish’ when defining the genres is further complicated by the cultural biases underlying the need for a universal term “graphic novel,” which is essentially rooted in American and British contexts. Considering the cases of Europe and Japan, comics have been accepted as a legitimate art form and literary medium, eliminating the need for such a distinction. In France, for instance, comics, known as *bande dessinée*, have been published in high-quality albums and include themes suited for adult readers alongside children’s comics without perceived conflict. Similarly, in Japan, a significant portion of the population reads *manga*, which spans an extensive range of genres and themes. Thus, bringing about culturally specific terminology is crucial before emphasizing the necessity of distinctions (Murray, 2024).

Leaving genre disputes aside, several key works, often hailed as “the” graphic novels, have achieved remarkable success by distinguishing themselves from the others. Will Eisner is credited with the coinage of the term “graphic novel” by subtitled his work, *A Contract with God* (1978), as such on its cover. Alan Moore’s *Watchmen* (1986–87) and Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) revolutionized the superhero themes of the genre, achieving global impact and inspiring the production of local heroes, as will be discussed later in this chapter. The recognition of graphic novels in mainstream literature was firmly established with Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1980-1991), which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1992. Its innovative use of photographs in storytelling and its narrative techniques set a precedent for the genre, as will be explored in Chapter 3. Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000) marked a significant breakthrough for women in the field. It became a pivotal work in feminist studies and paved the way for examining women’s narratives from a transnational lens, positioning it as a pioneering example in such contexts. Similarly, the works of Özge Samancı and Burcu Türker, like Satrapi’s, bring a transnational perspective to women’s narratives by presenting their life stories in a different language and country, as discussed in the analysis section. Receiving prestigious awards, being translated into various languages, and becoming a subject for academic studies have expanded the graphic novel’s audience and spurred deeper critical analysis and theoretical exploration, which is vital to underline while considering genre disputes in the field.

2. Positioning the Notion of Graphic Narrative

As the need for storytelling persists, people continue to use elements that provide endless narrative opportunities, such as image-text combinations, to tell their

stories. Likewise, as digital communication forms evolve, the enrichment of various narrative structures is inevitable. Moreover, the diversity in today's literary genres and narrative forms is not limited to works presented in different cultural contexts. Still, the new opportunities that digital technologies offer creators expand visual narrative possibilities and reveal new ways to interact with the audience. In essence, this hectic playground makes it increasingly difficult to draw definite and rigid frameworks on genres owing to the nature of this constantly moving and changing development process. Therefore, when defining these genres, the necessity of adopting a more flexible and inclusive approach by considering both past examples and today's technological and cultural developments begins to come to the fore for several studies.

Hillary Chute and Marianne DeKoven introduced graphic narrative as a broader concept, which they "define as narrative work in the medium of comics" (2006, p. 767) in their essay *Introduction: Graphic Narrative*. Shortly after, Chute noted that many of the landmarks of graphic novels, such as *Maus*, *Persepolis*, and *Fun Home*, are nonfiction rather than novels. Therefore, for Chute, the term graphic narrative offers the opportunity to be more inclusive as "the substantial length implied by novel remains intact, but the term shifts to accommodate modes other than fiction" (2008, p. 453).

To Daniel Stein and Jan-Noël Thonthe, while the term graphic novel is "historically resonant and culturally specific" enough to exclude different forms, formats, genres, and storytelling traditions from around the world, for the notion of graphic narrative, further exploration of its narratological foundations, format, genre, and cross-cultural applications is still necessary. (2013, p. 7). Nevertheless, being an advocate for "subscribing to the more general notion of 'graphic narrative,' signaling

both the aim of developing a comics narratology [...] and an awareness of the transcultural and transnational varieties of graphic storytelling” is preferable to escape from limitations of the term graphic novel (2013, p. 7).

2.1. Telling Life Stories with Graphic Narration: The Women’s World

In *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures* (2012), Elisabeth El Refaie analyses eighty-five books from North America and Western Europe with an interdisciplinary approach and argues the centrality of the autobiography in the contemporary medium of comics (p. 36). According to Refaie’s extensive study, telling personal stories through graphic narratives has increasingly dominated the field of life writing. Moreover, when including contemporary forms of storytelling and innovative ways of reaching out to the broad audiences that multimedia proliferated, like webcomics or diary comics, “the centrality of autobiography becomes even more apparent” (Kunka, 2018, p. 4). Although the terminology of autobiography and comics, which have long been attempted to be deconstructed, may seem restrictive, for Refaie, the genre of autobiographical comics should be considered “as a loose category of life writing through the use of sequential images and (usually) words” (2012, p. 48), which makes the description more inclusive in essence and much more similar to term graphic narratives. While Refaie’s study underlined the interaction between comics and autobiography, it is still essential to argue the intersection of the medium of comics with feminist critique and autobiography studies.

In her influential book *Graphic Women* (2010), Hillary L. Chute draws attention to contemporary and inventive life narratives of women to argue how they

expand the frontiers of studies by addressing issues of trauma, memory, sexuality, identity, and family relationships through the medium of comics. According to Chute, the image-text interplay utilizes a powerful voice for self-representation and creates a powerful, multifaceted way to represent women's experience and subjectivity, enabling women to tell their stories by drawing their bodies in a way that uniquely conveys personal and political experiences (2010, p. 3-4). To demonstrate how graphic narratives facilitate voicing traumatic life stories and allow for textual and visual storytelling layering, Chute focuses on five authors and six books⁷, making the analysis a significant study in the field. Shedding light on how women use graphic narratives to tell personal stories and criticize societal norms, Chute advances feminist literary studies and broadens the scope of comics scholarship.

Chute's work is a groundbreaking contribution to feminist discourse in the field and offers a valuable framework for examining women's graphic life narratives. Her analysis combines a range of texts and engages deeply with feminist literary criticism, however, it remains largely focused on North American works, with limited engagement beyond the Western canon. In contrast, works such as Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* have gained international recognition and opened a space for transnational discussions within the genre. Yet even *Persepolis* owes much of its visibility to its reception in Western markets. As Kennedy-Karpat (2015) explores in her analysis of *Poulet aux prunes*, Satrapi's transnational position not only allows her to adapt her own work across mediums, like comics to films, but also to navigate and challenge national identity frameworks through narrative form. Such scholarship

⁷ Aline Kominsky-Crumb's *Love That Bunch*, Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, Lynda Barry's *One! Hundred! Demons!*, Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, Phoebe Gloeckner's *A Child's Life* and *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*

provides an important bridge between local histories and global circulation. Still, when we shift the focus to the Turkish context, we find a noticeable gap: critical engagement with Turkish women's graphic narratives remains scarce, underscoring the need for localized readings informed by both feminist and transnational perspectives.

3. Turkish Context:

In the Turkish context, the origins of graphic narratives as storytelling tools and means of communication can be traced back to caricatures published in newspapers and magazines. Owing to the spread of printing media and the development of its publishing technique, the history of graphic narratives dates back to the Tanzimat period (Acar, 2020). The proliferation of newspapers and magazines during this period caused graphic arts to spread, providing an accessible form of communication even for the illiterate. In essence, in the Ottoman Empire, where the depictions of real people, animals, and divine figures were traditionally avoided to prevent idolatry and maintain monotheism in Islamic culture (see; aniconism), the evolution of graphic depictions spread to society through publications is one of the best indicators of the modernization, or Westernization, process mentioned earlier.

With the Ottoman Empire's turn toward the West, caricatures emerged in everyday life, eventually evolving into comic strips and, much later, comics. Some scholars have attempted to trace the local origins of these forms, drawing connections between the visual style of caricature and miniature painting, as well as between their humorous elements and the traditional Karagöz shadow play (Öngören, 1983, p. 59). This approach, however, has been subject to critique. Levent Cankat, for example, argues that such interpretations amount to little more than an attempt to

construct an artificial tradition (2024, p. 54). According to Cantek, the mere illustration of texts does not inherently connect them to comic art. The text is the main focus in miniatures and storybooks, while the image is complementary. In comics, on the other hand, images and text form an authentic whole. That's why establishing arbitrary historical "milestones" is insufficient to create a tradition (2024, p. 54).

Although efforts to construct a comprehensive history of comics in Türkiye sometimes result in varying perspectives, the world of caricature and caricature magazines, from the late Ottoman period to the present, constitutes an important area within Turkish literature. Particularly in terms of women entering the field of graphic arts and gaining visibility in publishing and humor, examining women's historical relationship with caricature is essential. In this context, the Women's Library and Information Center's agenda⁸ of *Women and Humor* offers a valuable selection by bringing together numerous female artists. As the publication highlights, one of the earliest examples of women's humor and caricature is the magazine *Leylak*, published only once in 1914. The cover described it as a "literary humor magazine for women," and it featured an illustration by Fatma Zehra (Tümer, 2007). Furthermore, Selma Emiroğlu, with her first caricature published in *Amcabey* magazine in 1943, began to be widely recognized as Türkiye's first professional female cartoonist.⁹

⁸ For further information, see <https://kadineserleri.org/ajandalar/>

⁹ Although Emiroğlu is recognized as the first professional female caricaturist in Türkiye, many other artists who achieved significant success in the field of humor magazines and became widely known also emerged alongside her. Among these distinguished artists are names such as Semiramis Aydınlik, Selma Gündüz, Özden Öğrük, Gülay Batur, Ramize Erer, Meral Onat, and Piyale Madra. The Women and Humor publication is a highly valuable collection that enables us to learn about these and many other figures. For more information on female caricaturists, see:

Sipahi, I., & Hayatseven, H. I. (Eds.). (2007). *Kadın Ve Mizah: Kadın Karikatüristler*. Kadın Eserleri Kütüphanesi ve Bilgi Merkezi Vakfı

The presence of women in the history of graphic narratives in Türkiye since the late Ottoman period is significant, as it demonstrates that their emergence in this field did not begin only with the momentum gained after the 1980s. Indeed, while women's presence was scarcely seen in the developing comic book scene in Türkiye during the decades following the establishment of the Republic, they achieved greater visibility in the field of caricature towards the 21st century.

Levent Cantek, a pioneering figure in Turkish comic book studies in *Türkiye'de Çizgi Roman*, discusses the emergence of a comic book culture in Türkiye around the 1930s. Until then, published works had not distinctly separated from caricature and comic strips nor established an independent space outside newspapers. In the 1930s, nation-building, national identity, and the Republican order were not established. Radical changes occurred in the state, and the Republic tried to find and settle its ideology. While the insistence on an independent Turkish identity caught momentum, the effort to keep up with the West continued. During this period, the education of the new generation became one of the prominent issues in nation-building. One of the tools that could contribute to children's education came to the fore as comic periodicals. The *Çocuk Sesi* (1928) magazine, prepared by a teacher, was published in this environment and became a significant turning point for comics in Türkiye.

Türkiye lacked original, locally-produced comics for a long time, with only foreign comics and their translations available. In this sense, the 1960s ushered in a new era for comics, introducing historical comics that celebrated Turkish identity and featured local heroes as counterparts to popular foreign figures. *Karaoğlan* (1963), created by Suat Yalaz, emerged as an ancestor of this genre and stands as one of Türkiye's first original comic creations. This 'authentic' genre notably influenced

Turkish cinema history, especially within the Yeşilçam era. In 1965, the *Karaoğlan: Altaydan Gelen Yiğit* movie was released, setting a trend for comics-based popular national superhero films such as *Tarkan* (1969) and the *Kara Murat* series, which began in 1972 (Cantek, 2024, p. 171).

The 1970s witnessed a boom in both publications and artists. Cantek identifies three key factors driving the explosion of comic production in this period. First, *Gırgır* (1972) humor magazine, embodied a large team of artists, had strong circulation, and substantial content output. Second, Tay Publishing, which introduced translated comics, employed technical staff like translators and achieved commercial success. Third, *Milliyet Çocuk* (1972), a children's magazine that was initially a newspaper supplement, achieved an unprecedented circulation of its kind and encouraged other newspapers to launch their children's publications.

In addition, the tension between the rightist and leftist ideologies becomes more visible and chaotic towards the 80s, with the emergence of contrasting ideological publications in the market. (Cantek, 2016, p. 40-41). The '80s were the period when humor magazines and comics publishers struggled to hold onto the market. The '90s were the time when comics publishing was at an end, dominated by the chaos of humor magazines. Despite magazines such as *Gırgır*, *Fırt*, and *Limon* maintaining their relatively high circulation, many humor magazines either closed or transformed into independent publications – for instance, *Limon* (1985) will later be *LeMan* (1991) (Cantek, 2024, p. 43).

Although comics could only maintain their former popularity and abundance at the beginning of the 21st century, a new realm began to take shape in Türkiye within humor and graphic arts. Humor magazines featuring caricatures and weekly comic strips kept graphic narratives alive and made significant contributions by

devoting pages to women artists. Remarkably, in the late 1970s and 1980s, when feminist critique and women's movements gradually gained political visibility, these women began expressing their perspectives through humor and art in these publications.

Gırgır magazine, which had the highest circulation in Türkiye at the time, began to dedicate a page titled "Gırgiriye" to its women caricaturists starting in 1977. The primary purpose of this page was to show the female perspective in humor; a feminist rebellion or sensitivity had not yet emerged (Binici, 2022, p. 274). Özden Öğrük's *Çılgın Bediş* (1976), a comic strip that centers on the adventures of a high school girl, began to be published on this page. What is quite remarkable is its adaptation into a TV series by 1996. Therefore, *Çılgın Bediş* represents a significant achievement for graphic narratives in mass media, following the adaptation of historical comics to film, mainly as it tells the daily life of a female protagonist created by a woman. In the 80s, another page in *Gırgır* was explicitly dedicated to women: "Biz Bıyıksızlar." In this space, where Gülay Batur, Ramize Erer, Meral Onat, Eda Oral, and Özden Öğrük came together, they gave initial examples of feminist criticism through women's experiences (Binici, 2022, p. 275).

The first women's magazine that encompassed feminist criticism would be considered "A Newspaper for Women" (Kadınlara Mahsus Gazete) *Pazartesi*, which started to be published in 1995. Ramize Erer, Feyhan Güver, Semra Can, and Gülay Batur published comic strips regularly in this magazine until the 83rd issue in 2002 (Binici, 2022, p. 280). Throughout the 90s and early 2000s, women's strips were featured in various magazines and newspapers, creating their criticisms, satires, and narratives. Ramize Erer's famous and much-discussed 'Kötü Kız' character, who is "self-confident, ruthless, vengeful, relaxed, feminist, reckless, interested in almost all

men, the nightmare of many women,” expanded the feminist critique of its time with these newspaper strips (Erer, 1999). In the 2010s, *Bayan Yanı* magazine, which best combined women’s humor, feminist criticism, and graphic narrative, began its publication with the claim of being “the first and only humor magazine published only by women in the world.” In its early years, *Bayan Yanı* was published in a women’s magazine format similar to *Pazartesi*, with content such as research, history articles, and interviews that went beyond a humor magazine, but this time with a humor-heavy focus. Over time, its assertive and down-to-earth discourse transformed it into a strong feminist humor magazine (Binici, 2022, p. 280).

Levent Cantek argues that comic production in Türkiye has developed its unique trajectory. Highlighting that comics were not intentionally created for children, Cantek notes that this gap was filled with foreign comics, while local creators often remain distant from producing work perceived as ‘childish’ out of fear or embarrassment. Consequently, Turkish graphic artists preferred to identify themselves as journalists who are also painters who “tell history” and “engage in politics” and appeal to newspaper readers, that is, primarily adults (Cantek, 2012). From this perspective, it can be argued that women graphic artists engage with women’s issues in a serious and politically conscious manner, using their art as a means of expression. Therefore, it is essential to situate women graphic artists within the broader framework of Turkish feminism.

CHAPTER III: Analysing Women's Graphical Life Narratives in Turkish Literature

Examples of women's graphic books, exceptional to their life narrations, are sadly scarce in Turkish comics. Bearing in mind the genre-bending modes of graphical narration, progressive digitalization of storytelling traditions, and increasing notice of political remarks of sharing individual life experiences of women, we can extend the frontiers of the cluster of "the Turkish examples" of women's graphical life narratives. However, to stress the noteworthy and discursive space, the graphical life narrations created in literary studies, as well as published and circulated books in the market, facilitate a better start for analysis.

In this context, the book *Bırak Üzülünler: Türkiye'de Büyümek* by Özge Samancı, which was first published in English in the United States but focuses on her childhood and life in Türkiye, stands out. Similar to Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis*, this book also presents the society the author grew up and its socio-political context, showcasing a similar approach in presenting these experiences to readers from different countries, making it a strong starting point for analysis. Secondly, the works of Gökçe Yavaş Önal, who portrays her experiences of womanhood through themes such as birth, pregnancy, and being a woman in the social world in her books *İçimdeki Buhranlar* and *Anne Bak*, are also noteworthy. Additionally, just as Art Spiegelman narrates the family drama he experienced through his father in *Maus*, Aslı Alpar's novel *Emine Hanım* also presents the story of her family through her grandmother's perspective, addressing the societal pressures on women and the patriarchal control over gender with a political voice. Finally, Burcu Türker's *Tatlı Limonlar*, published in German in Germany, deals with the Türkiye-Germany

migration and the mother-daughter relationship, offering a different perspective on transnational readings, thus making an important contribution to the analysis of this thesis.

1. Analysis:

This study's analytical framework is structured around four key thematic lenses according to the theoretical background presented in the literature review: autonomy of the female subject in narration, discovery of the self, relational dynamics among women, and the sociopolitical reflections of women's lives in Türkiye. The first theme examines how female authors become the subject of narration by drawing themselves to tell their lives and how they depict their bodies and embodied experiences using textual narration and visual representation to challenge dominant discourses on the publicity of the female body. The second theme focuses on mental health and emotional struggles, exploring how life narrations convey the psychological struggles of women and their self-discovery processes through expressive visual techniques and how they open a discursive space for understanding the female psyche. The third theme explores intergenerational relationships among mothers, daughters, and sisters, analyzing how graphic life writing becomes a space for negotiating familial bonds, tensions, and inherited narratives or struggles of womanhood. The last theme considers the sociopolitical dimensions of these narratives, investigating how personal experiences intersect with larger historical and cultural discourses on gender in Türkiye. Thus, this study aims to uncover how these life stories told in the medium of comics articulate the personal as political, transforming individual stories into collective feminist testimonies.

1.1. Özge Samancı; Bırak Üzölsünler: Türkiye’de Büyömek [Dare to Disappoint: Growing up in Turkey] (2015)

1.1.1. The Life and Work of Özge Samancı:

Özge Samancı (1975) is a Turkish artist, author, and professor specializing in comics, media arts, and interdisciplinary storytelling. After getting her degree in Türkiye, she moved to the USA to pursue a Ph.D. in Digital Media at the Georgia Institute of Technology. Working as an Associate Professor at Northwestern University’s School of Communication in the Department of Radio, TV, and Film, her artistic work spans graphic novels, interactive media, and installations, often exploring personal and political themes. She actively engages in experimental storytelling, integrating technology and traditional narrative forms. (Samancı, n.d.). Samancı also has a comics web blog, *Ordinary Things*.¹⁰

Samancı gained recognition for her autobiographical graphic novel, *Dare to Disappoint: Growing Up in Turkey*, which reflects on her childhood and societal expectations in Türkiye. In her debut book, Samancı tells the coming-of-age story of a girl who lives in the coastal city of Türkiye. Surrounded by the social, political, and ideological challenges in every corner of her life, Samancı narrates how she coped with the quest for self-discovery while striving to meet her family’s expectations. Samancı invites readers into the world of a young girl navigating her inner struggles, torn between societal expectations and personal desires. Through

¹⁰ For more details, visit: <https://ordinarycomics.com/comics>

her story, she illustrates how political, military, and religious turmoil shape a woman's life.

Dare to Disappoint has been translated into French, Korean, Dutch, Turkish, Persian, and Romanian, demonstrating its international recognition and highlighting its contribution to introducing a transnational perspective to graphic narratives in Türkiye. An intriguing point to consider is that Özge Samancı published her work in 2015 in English, *Dare to Disappoint: Growing up in Turkey*, and later in 2017 in Turkish, *Bırakın Üzölsünler: Türkiye'de Büyömek*. The first edition in English was published in 2015 by Macmillan: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, a prestigious publishing company renowned for producing numerous works that have won Nobel Prizes in Literature, National Book Awards, and Pulitzer Prizes. Two years later, in 2017, the Turkish edition was published by İletişim Yayınları, one of Türkiye's most esteemed publishing houses. In 2023, the book was republished by Karakarga Yayınları, one of the leading publishers specializing in comics and graphic novels in the Turkish market.

Özge Samancı published her second graphic novel, *Evil Eyes Sea*, in 2024, without any translation available in Turkish yet. In this semi-autobiographical work, Samancı tells the journey of two young women whose lives are unexpectedly turned after witnessing a mysterious death during a scuba diving expedition. In this work, Samancı refers to the struggles of women, where political corruption, religious pressure, and moral distress impact young women's lives. Samancı says, "In this book, I share a window into a country where narrow political views limit personal power — a place that can be beautiful but also cruel." (Samancı, 2024).

Özge Samancı stands out not only with her books but also with her academic studies and art exhibitions abroad. Her graphic novels *Dare to Disappoint* and *Evil Eyes Sea* attracted the attention of many critics and received positive reviews in newspapers such as The New York Times and The Guardian.¹¹ Along with the notice, she received prestigious awards, such as the Berlin Prize (2017), the Ivan Allen College of Liberal Arts Distinguished Alumni Award (2020), and the Artist Fellowship Award in Media Arts (2023). Samancı's second book, *Evil Eyes Sea*, was included in "The Best Graphic Novels of 2024" and "The Guardian-Best Graphic Novels for Adults 2024" lists by the American Library Association (Samancı, 2024).

Paying closer attention to the reasons behind publishing the life story of a Turkish woman abroad for an audience likely unfamiliar with the cultural, linguistic, political, and religious nuances within the narrative, Samancı explains:

"[I] started making a webcomic called "Ordinary Things." I was doing it to entertain my friends in Turkey, but I decided to do it in English because it was going to be available on the web, and I wanted it to be available to my American friends. But it went beyond entertaining my friends and gained a larger audience from all over the world. I kept doing the website and started preparing this graphic novel idea I was carrying in my mind. I didn't consciously decide to do it in English, but that's how the book emerged." (Samancı, 2016)

Since *Dare to Disappoint*'s debut publication was planned abroad rather than in Türkiye, Özge Samancı focused on making the narrative more accessible to

¹¹ Russo, M. (2015, December 9). A Different World. The New York Times.
Smart, J. (2024, December 2). *The best graphic novels of 2024*. the Guardian.

foreign readers. She removed some anecdotes she originally wanted to include in the storyline and rewrote the story multiple times to ensure clarity (Samancı, 2020). However, these adjustments for an international audience do not mean the local reader's perspective was overlooked. Frequently drawing from personal experiences and emphasizing the power behind telling life stories, Samancı seeks to create a story that resonates with foreign readers and those in Türkiye who have lived through similar experiences (Azzam, 2017). Telling her life story turns into "presenting a slice of" Turkish society, making the political, ideological, and economic distress a relatable experience with the readers (Samancı, 2016). Therefore, while recounting her time in Türkiye, memories, and personal experiences, Özge Samancı simultaneously offers a critical perspective on gender, political structures, economic conditions, spatial dynamics, cultural identity, and ideological tensions embedded in the culture she depicts. In this regard, her narrative also presents a productive ground for analysis through an autoethnographic "mode of reading that questions not only the links between the *auto* and *ethnos*, but also the hierarchies between minor and major, centre and periphery" (Almas, 2021, p. 515)

From the readers' perspective, the book's narrative and visual elements stand out as key aspects. Instead of using conventional graphic novel depictions, such as neatly framed panel scenes, Samancı employs various materials and techniques to create a more subversive visual experience. Emphasizing that she avoids rigid boundaries in her storytelling, just as memories lack fixed frames and

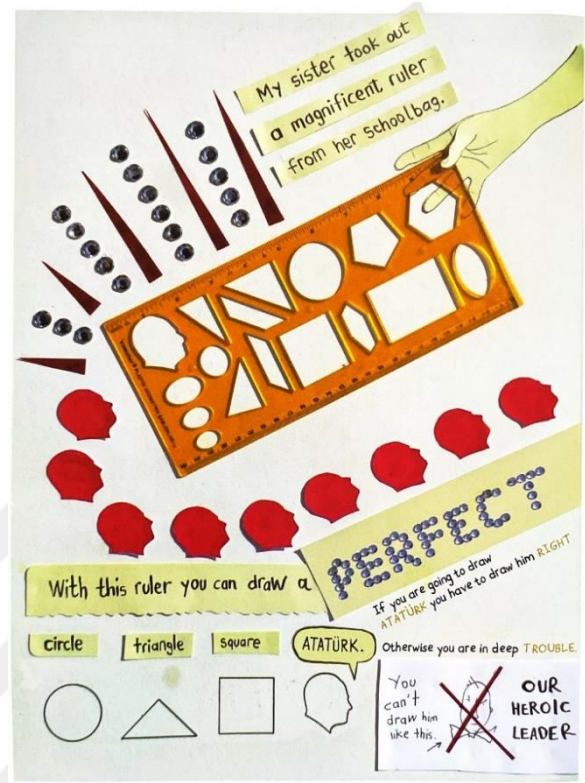


Figure 1: Dare to Disappoint, p.40

solid lines, she crafts a fluid and dynamic visual narrative (Samancı, 2016). She integrates diverse materials, textures, scribbles, collages, and dimensional elements into the depictions to achieve this. For instance, in **Figure 1**, Samancı incorporates the page with a photograph of her school ruler, craftwork, and patchwork. This narrative approach not only resonates with local readers by evoking shared experiences with the material of the ruler but also serves as a form of validation of this material for unfamiliar audiences. At the same time, its genre-bending nature offers an alternative and unique way of storytelling.

As in many other scenes, Samancı references collective memory by illustrating familiar objects such as 80s limited products, a Commodore 64 computer, public places adorned with Atatürk portraits, and erasers hung on strings;

items that many Turkish citizens who have gone through similar lifestyles would recognize. These details not only enhance the narrative's authenticity, reinforcing its sense of reality, but also serve as a powerful reflection of the shared experiences of countless students who once sat in those classrooms and the children who grew up witnessing the defining elements of their time.

1.1.2. The Self and the World: A Journey Through Inner and Outer Realms

As seen in **Figure 2**, the story of *Dare to Disappoint* starts with Özge watching her sister's school through binoculars from outside the schoolyard, admiring her sister's school experiences, and eagerly longing to study there. In this four-panel scene, Özge observes the school her sister Pelin attends through binoculars; the scene reflects

how, for her, being the one who is seen, rather than the one who sees,

holds particular significance. A little girl who lives with a desire to attend classes but is also curious about the world: most of all, she wants to experience the place she has always envied from her sister, the school she has looked at from afar.

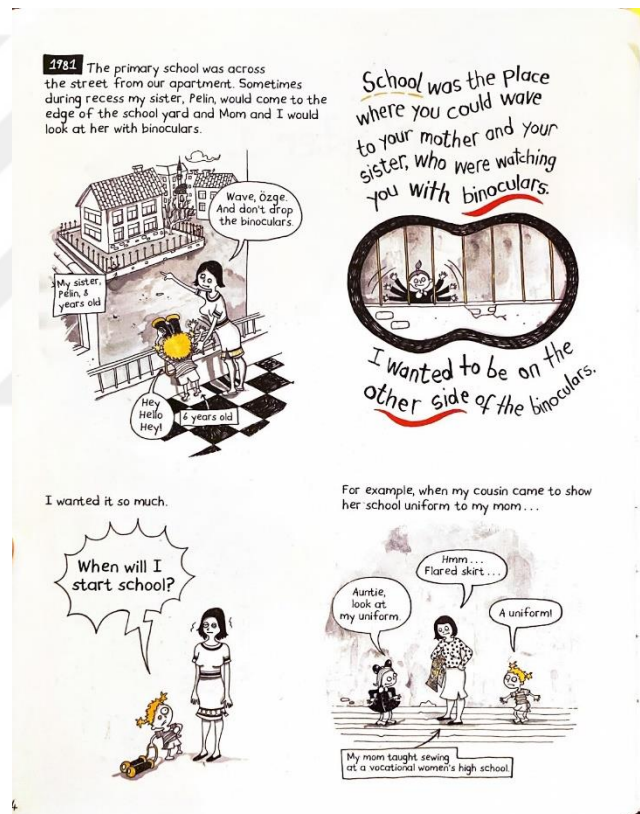


Figure 2: Dare to Disappoint, p.4

When the time comes for Özge to start school, she encounters different experiences than she imagined and begins to meet with the social and political codes of the society she lives in. Her primary school teacher, Hediye Harikatepe, whose name she remembers even in adulthood, becomes one of the first female figures she admires outside of her

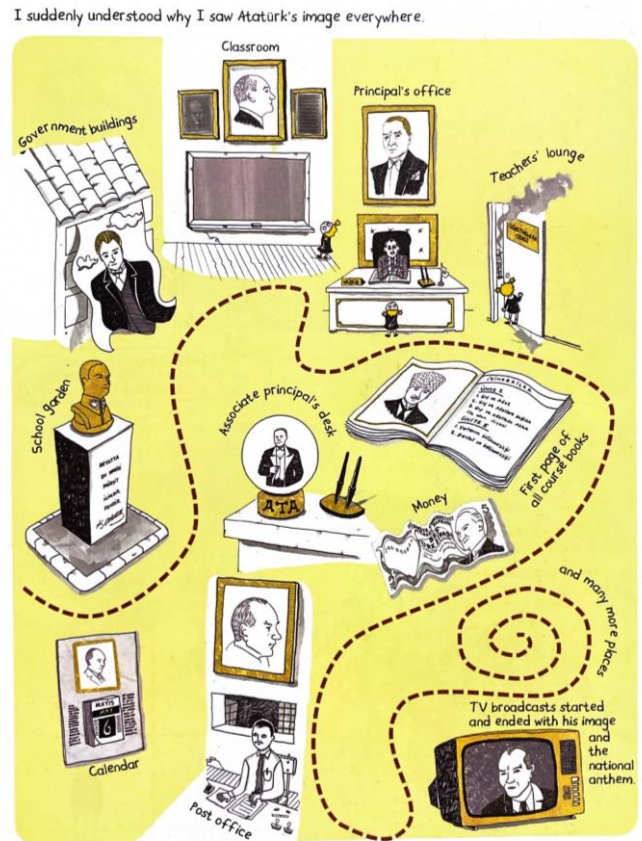


Figure 3: Dare to Disappoint, pp.25

family, with her strong presence, distinctive way of speaking, and unique charisma. At the same time, Teacher Harikatepe is the first person to teach what it means to be a young Turk worthy of their country and Atatürk. For instance, in **Figure 3**, a single-panel page is depicted, where Atatürk's portraits are shown following her wherever she goes along the dynamically drawn spiral path. While Özge learns that working hard is essential for a better future and that she must find a socially satisfying answer to the question, "What will you be when you grow up?" she also begins to realize how deeply ideology, politics, and history are embedded in everyday life.

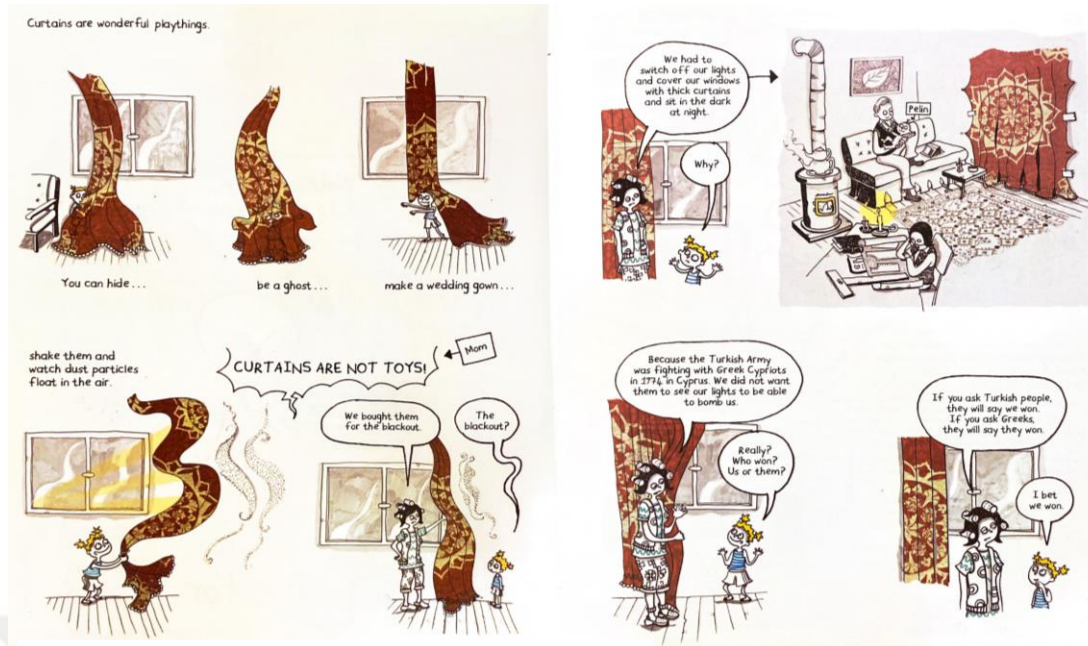


Figure 4: Dare to Disappoint, p.30-1

As a young girl, Özge begins to witness political or ideological traces not limited to public spaces or schools. Politics begins to make its presence strongly felt in everyday life as well. For instance, **Figure 4** is drawn as a predominantly black and white spread; the curtain, which Özge uses as a play object, is depicted as a powerful figure across four panels, with its significance emphasized through the use of orange. While it conceals the family's private life, the curtain also functions as a symbolic barrier that masks the political turmoil unfolding outside. In this scene, Samancı shares how she had started to be confused by the ideological and political conjuncture involved in people's private lives and society's everyday lives in Türkiye.

The quest for what to do in life and the strong presence of politics in everyday life constitute a significant source for the dichotomies, contradictions, and struggles in the story of Samancı. As she grows, she not only starts to be muddled with the social and political environment she is inevitably exposed to, but she also

starts to compare herself with her hardworking and academically successful sister, and feels more lost in finding a path in life.

1.1.3. Becoming in Comparison: Selfhood Between Sibling Ties and Societal Expectations

Özge Samancı's journey of self-discovery in *Dare to Disappoint* begins with the comparisons between her older sister and inquiries about what she expects from her life. This dynamic between Özge and her sister Pelin also offers compelling insights into the relational construction of the self for Samancı. **Figure 2**, for example, shows naive jealousy between sisters and admiration for education, reflecting Özge's efforts to find her ideals and search for herself. From the beginning, Özge is captivated by her sister's world in education, peeking through the fences of her sister's school and admiring her achievements. While she and her sister grow, and the political and economic turmoil decides the country's fate, the expectations stress that their future is in their hands and bound to their achievements within the educational system. The admiration and pressure of success often lead to comparisons, as Özge envies her sister's remarkable life while simultaneously yearning to emulate her.

Throughout the narrative, Samancı's sister, Pelin, emerges as a pivotal influence, representing a blend of inspiration and expectation. As her sister thrives academically and personally, Özge feels the weight of parental pressure to follow a similar path and achieve excellence. According to **Figure 5**, this dynamic adds complexity to Özge's struggle to define her authentic self and carve out her future. While her father encourages financial freedom for their girls, representing the support from a paternal figure, he also stresses the importance of getting a great

future, like her sister. We can see from this scene, as Özge navigates her complex emotional state, the poster in her bedroom, through which she shares her troubles and imagines conversations, gradually takes on the role of a character. Reappearing in various scenes throughout the book, this poster reflects how deeply embedded it is in her world, accompanying her inner struggles.

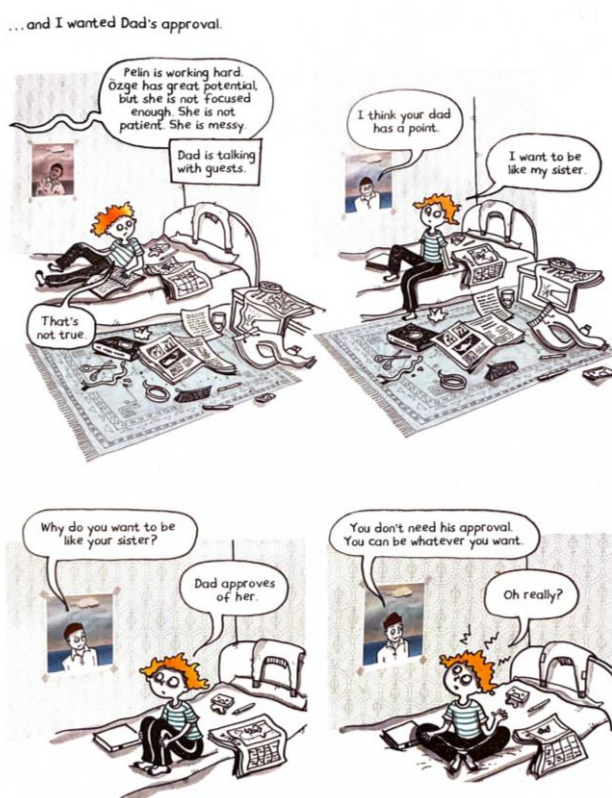


Figure 5: Dare to Disappoint, p.103

In **Figure 6**, sitting by the seaside and talking about life with her sister Pelin, Özge expresses both her regrets and her sorrow,

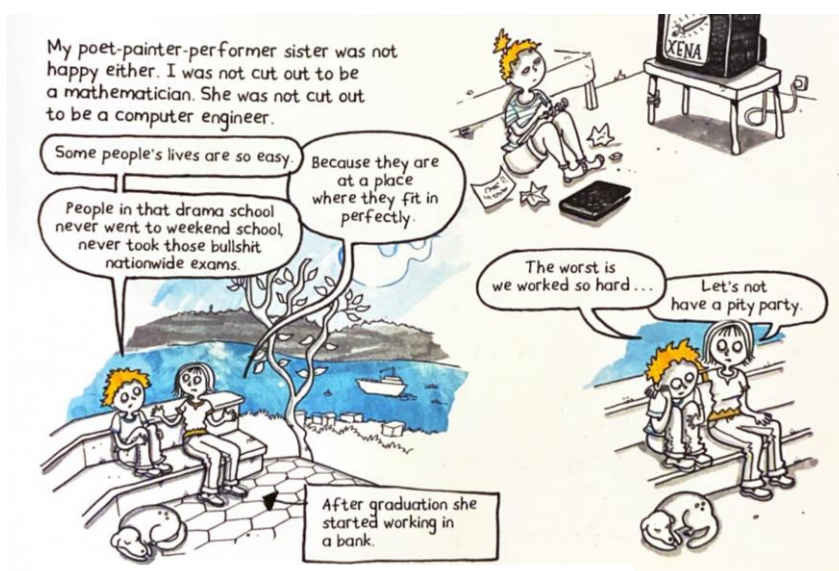


Figure 6: Dare to Disappoint, p.169

sharing her feelings openly. As Özge matures, she understands that comparing herself to her sister is pointless. Despite her sister Pelin's outward appearance of success and composure, Özge recognizes that she, too, grapples with her

uncertainties. This realization empowers Özge to shift her focus inward and strengthen her resolve to discover her identity, even if this means disappointing their parents. Ultimately, her sister's presence, support, and accomplishments play an essential role in Özge's journey, making the story not just one of personal growth but also a profound exploration of sister bonds and their impact on identity formation.

Özge Samancı's story reflects the anxiety, worry, and inner struggles created by trying to meet her family's and loved ones' expectations while being filled with the desire to chart her path. Samancı depicts different times of her life, but still with the locus of dichotomies in the politics in the country she lives in, and the challenges in deciding her future. Feeling anxious about finding the right occupation, constantly worrying about the future, and fearing disappointing the family's expectations, gives us an example of a woman who tries to discover her true self and wants to realize herself while experiencing psychological drawbacks from such a voyage.

In my dad's mind the only way for my sister and me to have a secure future was to study engineering or medicine at a prestigious university, get a good job, make lots of money, and be powerful.

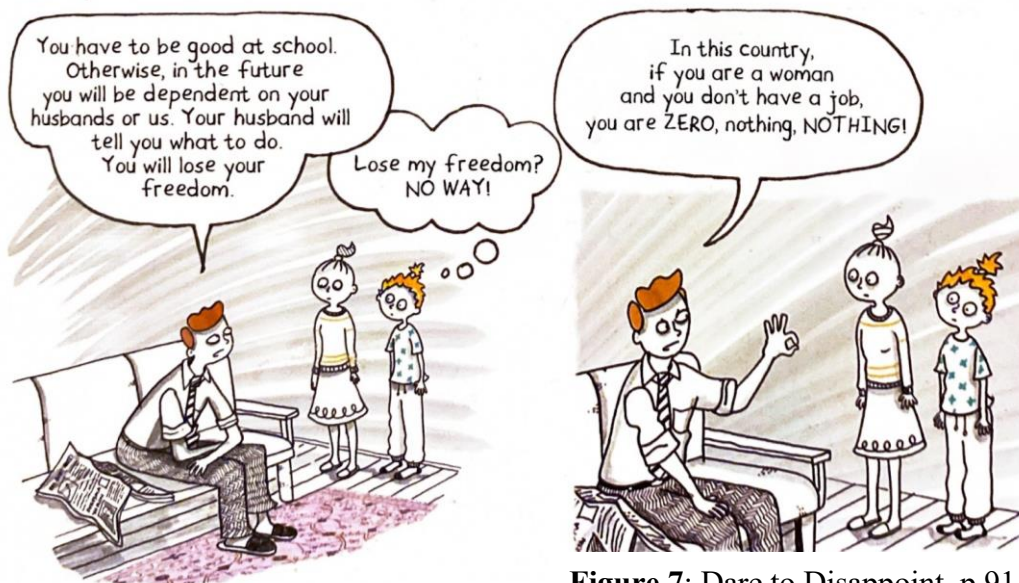


Figure 7: Dare to Disappoint, p.91

Moreover, as observed in Özge Samancı's story, expectations over life goals, the future, and occupation bring another facet of societal oppression in women's lives. Political turmoil and economic volatility of the country and the father's constant reminder to be someone when an adult, not to lose freedom as a woman, and not to be dependent on husbands (See **Figure 7**, in which their father gestures a zero with his hand to imply what the girls would be nothing if they don't have a job), Samancı presents a story of a women's stuckness between finding the authentic self and fighting for the bright future designed by the society. As this dilemma gets complicated and being successful in a rigid educational system gets overwhelming, Samancı constantly attempts to find a path in life by trying various occupations.

What we see in **Figure 8**, following various advice she receives about career choices from different individuals across multiple frames, Özge once again reflects on her future. By combining elements such as photography and illustration, she constructs a layered narrative through a mixed-media collage. In this scene, Samancı aspired to be an artist and play in theatres,

thinking she had found the right path, the people around her started to intervene

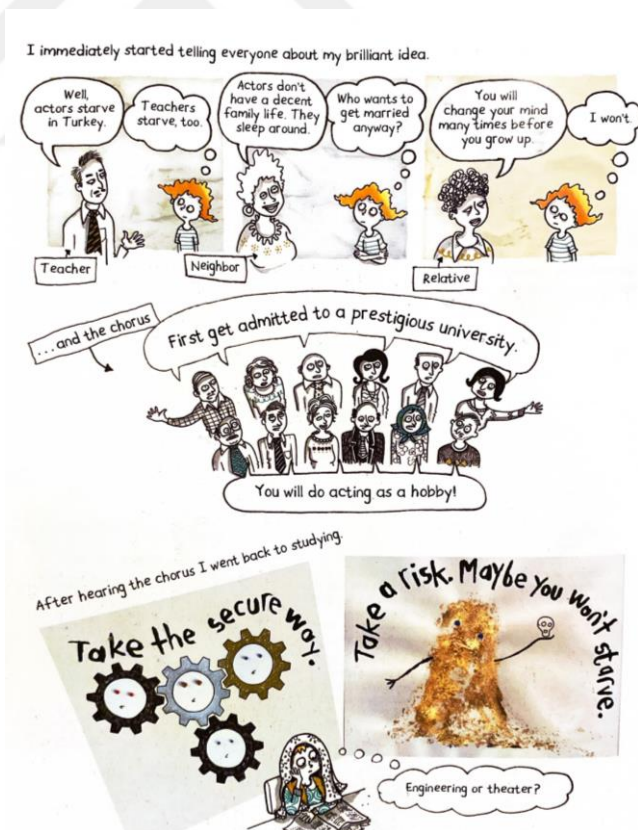


Figure 8: Dare to Disappoint, p.108

with such an “irrational” decision, since getting a great career meant being a doctor, engineer, or a civil servant. On the one hand, Samancı portrays a girl who is alarmed and oriented to have a prestigious career and a comfortable life; on the other, she tells the story of a confused and depressed woman who struggles to find the balance between her dreams and traditional social expectations. Nonetheless, “daring to disappoint” her family and expectations is what emerges as the way out for following her passion and profession in art.

1.1.4. Writing the Unwritten: Giving Voice to Silent Traumas and Owning the Body

In addition to sharing her efforts to find herself surrounded by the political, familial, and psychological aspects of life in her story, Samancı also shares with the reader her experience of harassment and assault, which is a substantial cause of mental struggle and trauma for women. In **Figure 9**, Samancı starts to share the incident where she was harassed and attacked by two men



Figure 9: Dare to Disappoint, p.155

while walking alone on the road, as she details the traces of fear and panic that this experience created in her. In this page depicting a traumatic memory, the male hand illustrations dominate much of the layout to enhance the dramatic effect of the

narrative. The assault scene extends across several pages, reappearing through different descriptions and visual framings, emphasizing its lingering impact. By sharing her experience, Samancı offers an intimate perspective on how women cope with such traumas and draws attention to the fact that traumas are difficult to express due to the erroneous notions that society imposes on women. However, sharing this traumatic memory and revealing its effects makes a significant contribution to the women's struggle.

Through this scene, Samancı also addresses women's sexual experiences and provides another example of a female narrative that is not frequently encountered: the first sexual experience.

Recounting being attacked by two men while walking alone on the street, Samancı describes what she felt and thought at the moment of the attack. As depicted in **Figure**

10, while she was trying to resist



Figure 10: Dare to Disappoint, p.154

the man to save her life and escape from being raped, one of the many thoughts that crossed her mind was that she had not yet had her first sexual experience and did not want to die without experiencing it. After surviving the attack with the realization of having no sexual intimacy, Samancı also tells of how she took action to have this bodily experience by making a partner after the incident. Sharing immediate thoughts about her bodily experience at the edge of the rape and having

a partner to get rid of the possibility of dying without any sexual intimacy presents a great example of a female subject in the narration. With this story, Samancı challenges social expectations by focusing on women's sexual experiences while also revealing how the female subject re-establishes her authority over her own body.

From her early school years to the final days of university, Samancı narrates her family life, school experiences, relationships with society and those around her, her search for identity, anxieties about the future, trauma, and fears, all through diverse visual depictions and narrative techniques. In the end, with the support of her friends, she defies challenges and expectations, courageously stepping into the world of art and bringing her story to a close. Through her portrayal of the educational system, social life, economy, politics, and womanhood in Türkiye, Samancı's narrative offers an intimate look at how a woman becomes the subject of her own story with the depiction of body and sharing intimate stories and how personal transformations, growth, and mental processes shape a woman's life. Additionally, it sheds light on how women construct their sense of self in-relation-to and with the stories of other women around them and, ultimately, how societal pressures and oppression shape women's everyday experiences.

1.2. Gökçe Yavaş Önal; İçimdeki Buhranlar (2020) [Me and My Anxieties], Anne Bak! (2022) [Mom, Look!]

1.2.1. An Overview of Gökçe Yavaş Önal:

Gökçe Yavaş Önal (1984) is an independent illustrator and comic artist based in Istanbul, Türkiye. Initially, she started her career by teaching art in schools.

Eventually, she transitioned to illustrating books, collaborating with many local and foreign authors, and being an Art Director in an esteemed publishing house (Onal, 2024). Embracing the digital age, Yavaş Önal utilizes social media platforms to update and communicate with her readers about her projects and share her illustrations and comics.¹²

In 2020, Yavaş Önal published her first graphic work, *İçimdeki Buhranlar*, under the resonant motto of “Yes, we are not alone, nor are you. These anxieties are ours!”¹³ Yavaş Önal, in *İçimdeki Buhranlar*, depicts the story of her daily life and her personal experiences in everyday routines, dialogues, and challenges she passes through. Yavaş Önal encapsulates experiences of the tensions, fears, paranoias, confusions, and anxieties she carries as a woman and mother, all presented with a witty and entertaining tone. Yavaş Önal’s moments are a poignant exploration of various facets of a woman’s life, particularly from a humorous perspective.

Yavaş Önal’s second graphic work, *Anne Bak!* was published in 2022. This time, Yavaş Önal tells her bittersweet and still anxious experiences throughout pregnancy and early motherhood. Through snapshots of her evolving life, she reflects on the societal roles imposed on women, the pressures of superstition, gossip, prejudices, and the unattainable expectations of perfection. Engaging in profound dialogues about the dynamics of motherhood, Yavaş Önal offers a unique perspective that resonates deeply with her audience.

¹² To explore more, visit: <https://www.instagram.com/gokceyavas>
<https://www.behance.net/gokceyavas>

¹³ *İçimdeki Buhranlar*. (2020). Tudem Kitabevi. Retrieved January 2025, from <https://www.tudemkitabevi.com/urun/icimdeki-buhranlar>

Both of Gökçe Yavaş Önal's books are published by Desen Yayınları, an imprint of the Tudem Publishing Group, a key player in Türkiye's literary market. Known for its focus on graphic narratives, including comics, manga, and cartoon books, Desen Yayınları occupies an important place in the industry. In addition to her work as an illustrator for numerous children's books published under Tudem Edebiyat, Yavaş Önal also serves as the Art Director at the publishing house. She is currently preparing to release *Bana Prenses Deme* [Do not Call Me a Princess], a feminist, fantastical, and comedic graphic novel set in the Middle Ages, co-created with Zeynep Alpaslan (Alpaslan & Yavaş Önal, 2025).

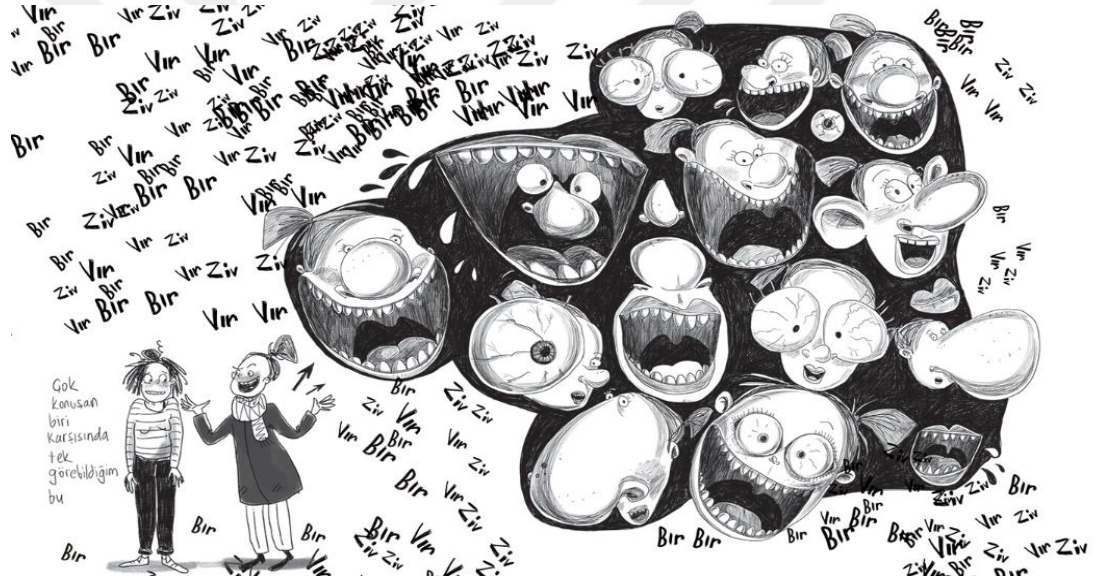


Figure 11: İçimdeki Buhranlar, p. 34-5

In Yavaş Önal's books, humor takes center stage. Acknowledging that her depictions often include exaggerated elements owing to the comedic nature of her storytelling, she emphasizes that all her stories stem from real-life experiences (Yavaş Önal, 2022). Unlike the component of comedy, the time flow differs in each book's narrative. In *Anne Bak!*, time follows a structured timeline, moving sequentially from life before motherhood to pregnancy, childbirth, and early

parenting experiences. In contrast, *İçimdeki Buhranlar* does not adhere to a linear progression; memories, anxieties, struggles, and moments of misfortune are presented more spontaneously, non-sequentially to the reader. In **Figure 11**, for instance, Yavaş Önal illustrates the exaggerated and distorted heads that come to her mind when she encounters someone who talks excessively. Much like Özge Samancı, Yavaş Önal frequently moves away from strict panel frames in graphic narrative, opting instead for a more freely designed page layout.

1.2.2. Locating the Self: Between the Inner Gaze and the Outer World

Gökçe Yavaş Önal's first book, *İçimdeki Buhranlar*, as its name suggests, deals with the emotional states of a woman, her introspection, her questioning about her place in society, and criticizing the functioning of her mind. Yavaş Önal shares scenes from her life by focusing on her phobias, hobbies, depressive moments, her desire to distance herself from the crowd, and the problems she experiences as a misfit in the outside world. In many scenes, we see a portrait of a woman who constantly questions her emotional state and tries to find a place for herself in the society she lives in.

From a narratological perspective, Yavaş Önal sometimes adopts an objective tone when depicting her struggles, such as motion sickness or migraines. At times, she narrates these moments as if observing herself from the outside, addressing a 'distant' version of herself who struggles to adapt to society and everyday life. Through this approach, she explores her self-discovery journey with detachment and a lack of self-judgment. On the other hand, Yavaş Önal frequently adopts an introspective perspective when telling her stories, offering a more intimate

portrayal of herself. This ‘closer’ self, through which she observes and interprets her experiences, provides a different narrative lens into her inner world. For instance, when she depicts her relationships with animals, love for coffee, or fondness for plants, we encounter this ‘inner eye,’ presenting an alternative

viewpoint on her portrayed self.



Figure 12: İçimdeki Buhranlar, p. 66-7

The choice of narration that

comes closer and further away from the self offers us an angle from women’s self-discovery journeys. We can see in **Figure 12**, in which she depicts herself on a house cleaning day, when telling herself through her eyes, the woman is joyful and productive, and sees herself as she is. Still, in a situations like gets stuck in the crowd and misses the bus, as in

Figure 13, when she cannot adapt



Figure 13: İçimdeki Buhranlar, p. 14

to society, she looks at herself as if she were another person, far from her cheerful personality, who creates these “faulty” situations, criticizes her, and treats her harshly. Nevertheless, the narrative presents us with an authentic and approved personality when looking at the self through inner eyes instead of the public eye. This dual perspective, Zoom-in vs. Zoom-out approach to narrating the self, allows Yavaş Önal to reflect on how society perceives her while exploring the meanings she assigns to her identity in her inner world. By shifting between external observation and internal introspection, she creates a compelling example of how a woman becomes the subject of her own life story, actively shaping her narrative.

1.2.3. The Body Unveiled: Stories of Birth, Blood, and Becoming



Figure 14: İçimdeki Buhranlar, p. 40-1

Approaching the subject of the female self in narration from a different perspective, Gökçe Yavaş Önal presents compelling examples of women's biological experiences, an aspect often overlooked in women's life narratives. In

İçimdeki Buhranlar, Yavaş Önal explores menstruation, portraying this natural and recurring bodily process through the lens of a woman, as she illustrates in **Figure 14**. In this scene, where the uterus is personalized and how menstruation is experienced from its perspective is depicted. This depiction displays how this biological experience causes changes or difficulties in the woman's mental and physical functions. The fatigue, anxiety, mood swings, feelings of inadequacy, and guilt experienced before menstruation (also known as PMS: Premenstrual Syndrome) turn into a psychological process that is left behind with the onset of menstruation. Yavaş Önal reveals the harmony between the body and mind of a woman with a biological experience while challenging the social perception of the private notion of the body by subjectifying herself in the narration and highlighting her experience.

Building on the themes

explored in her previous work, *İçimdeki Buhranlar*, Gökçe Yavaş Önal continues to highlight women's bodily experiences and women as the subjects of their own life stories in her second book, *Anne Bak!*. In her second book, Gökçe Yavaş Önal engages with bodily experiences, such as pregnancy, birth, postpartum, or breastfeeding, and offers instances of the female

storyteller becoming the subject of her story by drawing her body within this



Figure 15: Anne Bak!, p.9

process. The main themes covered throughout the book are the changing body during pregnancy, alienation from the body, getting used to the change, and adapting to a new body and life. In **Figures 15 and 16**, for example, the beginning and end of pregnancy are depicted across two different pages, the impulse for comparison takes center stage. Yavaş Önal shares a transformation experience over a

pregnant body, which initially evokes admiration and excitement but later evolves into a completely changed and distorted form over time.

Son aylarda bastaki mutlu ruh hâlim biraz değişti. Yorgunluk arttı. Bedenim iyice şişti. Kaygılar başladı.



Figure 16: Anne Bak!, p.12

The pregnancy, on the other hand, is accompanied not only by physical changes but also by fiercely developing fears and anxieties as birth approaches. Aside from the deterioration of the body, Yavaş Önal draws a portrait of a woman who fearfully thinks about how she should give birth. The depiction of a woman considering many birth methods (such as epidural, cesarean section, and water birth) reveals the stress and anxiety created by an experience specific to the female body, which shows the mental difficulties that women experience along with their physical experiences.

Figure 17 depicts a body that has lost its former vitality after birth. It tells the story of how a new mother struggles with her deformed and trying-to-get-accustomed body, and what efforts she makes to recover. Yavaş Önal shares her

private experience of facing the reality of a new body when desiring to get her old body back with a fresh haircut, waxing, cleaning her nails, and losing postpartum weight. Although physical changes, struggles of coping with these changes, and eventual acceptance may seem like Yavaş Önal's personal stages of the adventure of pregnancy, this story represents a shared



Figure 17: Anne Bak!, p. 34

experience that many women go through before and after giving birth. As concluded from the feedback Yavaş Önal receives from her readers¹⁴, many women see a part of themselves and similarities in these descriptions of pregnancy and birth. Hence, while Yavaş Önal tells her life story in which she becomes a subject, she also sheds light on the shared experiences of women who give birth.

1.2.4 Echoes of Motherhood: Relational Journeys of Womanhood

By sharing her experiences of pregnancy, birth, and motherhood, Gökçe Yavaş Önal not only establishes a connection to the stories of other women but also creates a foundation for exploring her relationships with the women around her. In

¹⁴ see; Mağden, O. (2022, June 1). *Kasabası Da Köyü De Aynı: Annesi*. İyi Kitap. <https://www.iyikitap.net/2022/06/01/kasabasi-da-koyu-de-ayni-annesi/>

Yavaş Önal also shares the her reader's comments and reactions on the books in her IG account. see; Yavaş Önal, G. [@gokceyavas]. (n.d.). *Sizden Gelen* [IG story highlights]. Instagram. Retrieved January 2025, from <https://www.instagram.com/stories/highlights/18000097171875706/?hl=tr>

the opening pages of *Anne Bak*, Yavaş Önal reveals that, during her childhood, her only reference to motherhood was her mother; she did not grow up in an environment surrounded by houses full of children or other experienced maternal figures. This left her with limited relational models for constructing a maternal identity, making her approach to motherhood both experimental and unpracticed, as she admits.

As Yavaş Önal explores and struggles to define her role as a mother, she reflects on how she is concerned about becoming a good parent and raising her daughter differently. In **Figure 18**, Yavaş Önal expresses her desire to raise her children in a way that diverges from societal norms, suggesting that her ideas about motherhood are shaped less by broader social expectations and more by her standpoints. She



Figure 18: İçimdeki Buhranlar, p. 5

challenges conventional notions of motherhood, striving to be a different kind of mother who resists societal rules while raising her children, thus marking her relational experience of motherhood as defined by the tension between societal norms and her vision. Despite this rebellious stance, Yavaş Önal recounts how her imagined version of motherhood evolved into the reality of raising a daughter who ultimately became the person she wanted her to be.

In *Anne Bak!*, Yavaş Önal's relational self is also portrayed through her dual roles as a mother and a daughter. While sharing her experiences of pregnancy and motherhood, she also reflects on her mother's involvement in these new experiences and their dialogues about motherhood. In

Figure 19, Yavaş Önal depicts herself as a daughter who gains a deeper understanding of her

mother's experiences as a parent after becoming a mother herself. On the one hand, she navigates the challenges of motherhood, and on the other, she continues to be seen as a daughter in her mother's eyes, highlighting the ongoing construction of her relational self.

Beyond the women in her immediate circle, Yavaş Önal's story also illustrates how women in society contribute to the construction of female identity through shared experiences such as childbirth, motherhood, and pregnancy, with the ingredients of superstition, gossip, or prejudice¹⁵. It highlights how external interventions into these personal and bodily experiences lead to the publicization and societal perception of the female body and its experiences. In many instances, Gökçe Yavaş Önal depicts the people encountered in social settings who find the



Figure 19: *Anne Bak!*, p. 63

¹⁵ These “ingredients” are in fact mentioned in the description of the book.

right to have a say in the pregnant body.

Based on Yavaş Önal's moments of encounters, it is observable that women, in particular, start these interventionist discourses. For example, women who have previously become mothers compare and evaluate the pregnant body using their experiences as a reference. At the same time, some openly criticize pregnancy and try to establish guilt over the decision to become a mother and

parents (**Figure 20**). Women who are not mothers, on the other hand, highlight themselves by beautifying their non-deformed bodies over the pregnant body (**Figure 21**).

These encounters show that pregnancy and motherhood are

such publicized subjects that society intervenes and tries to

control rather than letting it be a woman's individual and unique experience.



Figure 20: Anne Bak!, p. 16



Figure 21: Anne Bak!, p. 13

1.3. Ashl Alpar; Emine Hanım'ın Romanı (2020) [Emine Hanım's Novel]

1.3.1. Introducing Ashl Alpar:

Born and raised in Ankara, Aslı Alpar (1987) defines herself as a cartoonist who draws for a classless, borderless, exploitation-free world (Alpar, 2023). Alpar, who started her career in cartoons with the student caricature club she joined while studying Public Finance at university, has conducted academic studies in gender and cartoons in her educational life. Alpar aims to make the stories of women oppressed and devalued in society visible with her grandmother's life story in *Emine Hanım'ın Romanı*. According to Alpar, like many women, the life of her grandmother Emine Hanım was also disregarded; she lived for others, was remembered for others, and remained silent for others (Yıldırım, 2021). For Alpar, stories like these, which are the fate of many women in society, are essential in showing that they are political as they are private (Hakyemez, 2020). Her oppositional stance to power shapes the core themes of her works, embracing the issues that vary from women's rights to LGBTIQ+ rights, animal rights, freedom of the press, and expression.

Aslı Alpar actively shares her activist, political, and intellectual perspectives through her personal social media accounts¹⁶, website, and social media accounts.

In addition to these platforms, she runs an online newspaper¹⁷ and a podcast series¹⁸

¹⁶ For further information, visit <https://www.behance.net/aslialpar>; <https://aslialpar.com/>; <https://www.instagram.com/aslialpar/>

¹⁷ Additional details can be found here: <https://muzir.org/> https://linktr.ee/muzirnesriyat?utm_source=linktree_profile_share<id=b847f684-314f-458e-89a5-f50f353aab84; <https://www.instagram.com/muziryayinda/>

¹⁸ <https://open.spotify.com/show/6PShaEtQb3S25KwPSrhD7q?si=e80f69a0fb484ab>

that bring together diverse voices and opinions. She continues her work as an illustrator for *KAFKA*, one of Türkiye's leading literary magazines. Her book, *Emine Hanım'ın Romanı*, which has gone through two editions, was published by Karakarga, an imprint of Desen Publishing specializing in graphic novels.

Aslı Alpar's narrative weaves together both autobiographical and biographical elements, offering a deeply intertwined account of family history while shedding light on the experiences of womanhood across generations. Centering on her grandmother's life, *Emine Hanım*, the story also includes the voices and experiences of other women in the family. Through this narrative, Alpar not only tells an individual life story but also makes visible the societal pressures and struggles that women have faced across different generations.

Aslı Alpar, in *Emine Hanım'ın Romanı*, conveys how serious mental illnesses and patriarchal oppression shape and limit a woman's life while providing a powerful example of traumas and stories of women's struggles passed down through generations. By telling the story of her grandmother's difficult and unhappy life with bipolar disorder, paranoia, and schizophrenia, Alpar transcends the life story of just one individual; she also makes this story a reflection of the social pressures women experience. Alpar, who rarely sees her grandmother smiling, traces the turmoil of her grandmother's sorrowful life while sharing the story of a granddaughter who questions how women are devalued in society through her family history. After her grandmother's death, she lost herself in the old family photographs, where her grandmother is rarely seen happy, more carefully triggers Alpar, aiming to write a story about the past, not only as a memory but also as a tool for social criticism and awareness.

Her grandmother's lifelong neglect, suppression, and unhappiness affected Alpar so profoundly that she focuses only on her grandmother and deliberately prefers to bring her identity to the forefront by not



Figure 22: Emine Hanım'ın Romanı, p.9

covering her face but anyone else's, as in **Figure 22**. In the photographs used in depictions, along with proving the sorrowful life of her grandmother, Alpar deliberately censors the faces except Emine Hanım so that her grandmother becomes the voice and representative of a previously



Figure 23: Emine Hanım'ın Romanı, p.54

silent life and shines out before anyone. (Kepenek, 2020). In the narrative, the deliberate use of this technique, graphic illustrations drawn over real photographs, not only reflects Alpar's politically engaged stance that prioritizes women's lives and stories but also demonstrates how she expands the boundaries of traditional graphic storytelling with her genre-bending approach, which effectively highlight

Alpar's visual and narrative authenticity. For example, as seen in **Figure 23**, Alpar creates a layered visual narrative with multiple hand drawings over the photograph of her grandmother with tears on her eye, while also visualizing the metaphor by placing hands on the image of a woman whose life is suppressed.

1.3.2. From Her Silence to My Voice: Intergenerational Legacies of Resistance

Emine Hanım's story begins with her father's dominance over her life, restricting her pursuit of education and denying her the freedom to marry the man of her choice. The father not only oppressed the emotions of her daughter but also left her a psychological burden to carry through until she died. Emine Hanım's mental struggles started to reveal, believing her husband was cheating on her, and was not satisfied with love. She became silent day to day and struggled deeply with severe mental health problems such as bipolar disorder, depression, and paranoid schizophrenia. As a young grandchild, Aslı Alpar starts to get confused with living with a granny who struggles emotionally, acts paranoid, and sees abnormal things. She tries to comprehend the pain she went through and to help as much as she can. However, for Aslı, Emine Hanım's condition was not sufficiently considered by her environment and was sometimes considered worthless. She was a woman who was neglected both psychologically and emotionally throughout her life.

Emine Hanım'in Romanı provides a potent example regarding intergenerational stories and the relational construction of female identities. Alpar aims to expand a feminist discourse by telling her grandmother's life story and the experiences of a woman she lived with. In her story, Alpar reveals how a woman's relationships with other women, especially with her mother and sisters, affect her

life and journey
of self-discovery.

In **Figure 24**, for
example, Aslı
presents the
photograph of
her grandmother
and her sister,

again with the
covering of the
face of the sister.

Even though this

photograph shows the lovely sisters from Alpar's family, for her grandmother, the behind-the-scenes represent a story of betrayal. The betrayal starts with the sister's snitching to their father, the man she loves. It constitutes the beginning of an unfinished love story that Emine Hanım carried as a burden throughout her life, which Alpar saw as a potential source of her mental illnesses. After this incident, Emine Hanım was exposed to violence by her father, had to give up on her love, and was married off to the first person who wanted to marry her, shaping not only her sense of self but also the future of a woman.

This painful emotional and physical experience not only shakes her relationship with her sister but also profoundly affects her relationship with her mother, who does not protect or stand up for her daughter from her father's cruelty. Emine Hanım's relationships with the women around her, her sister's betrayal, and her mother's passivity affected her life and identity. Even in the stories she told her



İkisinin en sevdiğim fotoğrafı ise yine çiftlikten; mutluluk, muziplik gözlerinden okunuyor. Fotoğrafın arkasına Saim Hanım şöyle yazmış: "Bu resimde acayip çıktığım için gülmeyeceğim."

Figure 24: Emine Hanım'ın Romanı, p.16

granddaughter, Aslı, years later, Emine Hanım's resentment towards her sister continued, and she rarely mentioned her mother throughout her life.

Counting on this story, it is also worth noting that this life story that Alpar witnessed, observed, and interpreted from her grandmother eventually becomes a relational story that also affected the identity she constructed. Her grandmother's story, along with her aunt's and mother's experiences, allows Alpar to develop thoughts about the place of women in society by listening to and observing the lives of the women around her. As she said in her interview, she is aware of many women's stories similar to her grandmother's in the society she lives in (Alpar, 2021). She wants not only to know but also to be the voice of women who are oppressed and not listened to in the patriarchal order, which is why it is possible to see the traces of these women's stories in her drawings and storytelling.

1.3.3. Where the Body Speaks: Tracing Women's Invisible Battles

It is worth noting that Aslı Alpar highlights the female subject in the narration by emphasizing the traumatic yet common women's experiences depicted in the book. By exploring her



Figure 25: Emine Hanım'in Romanı, p.26

grandmother's experiences with forced miscarriages and menopause, Alpar offers compelling insights into the portrayal of the female body in storytelling. In **Figure 25**, Alpar narrates the scene of her grandmother having a self-induced, almost torturing miscarriage at home by herself. This time, rather than relying on a photograph, Alpar frames and visualizes the experience she heard from her grandmother. Alpar particularly reveals the three miscarriage experiences where her grandmother wanted to terminate an unwanted pregnancy but avoided discussing the issue of abortion with her husband, possibly preventing pressure to give birth.

Alpar's depiction of her grandmother's miscarriage and the homemade solution she resorted to conveys a rarely told story about the female body. By illustrating this deeply personal and often silenced experience, Alpar brings a female subject to the forefront of life narration and emphasizes the female agency in making decisions about her body. This scene presents a woman actively asserting control over her bodily experiences while simultaneously highlighting how deeply personal yet socially taboo topics, such as unwanted pregnancies and abortion, can be reclaimed and narrated from a female perspective. In contrast to male-dominated storytelling, where women have often been reduced to objects within narratives shaped by others, Alpar's portrayal underscores the shift toward women becoming active subjects in their own life stories, reclaiming their voices and experiences on their terms.

In addition to miscarriage and unwanted pregnancies, Aslı Alpar also sheds light on an often-overlooked aspect of female bodily experience: the intersection of



Figure 26: Emine Hanım'ın Romanı, p. 39

sexuality, fertility, and medical authority. In **Figure 26**, Emine Hanım is depicted lying in bed, separated from her husband, lonely and unhappy; a visual representation of the emotional toll of her husband's frequent travels abroad, which prematurely ended their sexual intimacy. In this scene, we witness overlapping narratives: the reality of loneliness felt in bed and the imaginary image of a woman calmly waiting underwater alongside the fish, depicting the duality of her life with and without her mental struggles. Alpar further explores how Emine Hanım's early menopause adds another layer of complexity to their relationship, ultimately leading to a likely unwanted pregnancy. At a time when she was already struggling with mental distress, past miscarriages, and a lack of physical closeness with her husband, her doctor suggested that having another child would be a remedy for her condition. This menopause-remedy-birth narrative, which led to the birth of Alpar's mother, underscores how deeply issues of female fertility, sexuality, and bodily autonomy are shaped by external forces and how such topics remain marginalized in life narratives.

Beyond individual experience, Emine Hanım’s story is a striking example of how public authority and medical intervention exert control over women’s bodies. The doctor’s suggestion to conceive before menopause was framed as a medical necessity rather than a personal choice, disregarding Emine Hanım’s psychological well-being and desires. As Alpar personally witnessed while living with her grandmother, Emine Hanım was a woman facing mental health challenges and societal struggles. Nevertheless, her agency over her own body was overridden by a patriarchal medical system that saw menopause as a “problem” requiring intervention. This final pregnancy, therefore, illustrates the broader structures of social and medical control that dictate women’s reproductive choices, often leaving them with little say over their bodies.

In particular, Alpar boldly addresses topics that society deems private and discourages women from speaking about openly, such as bodily experiences, desires, and personal aspects of womanhood. By doing so, she moves beyond a singular life story and presents a perspective that challenges imposed boundaries and highlights collective female experiences. Alpar’s storytelling brings personal and unique aspects of women’s lives into the public sphere, confronting traditional norms of silence and offering a powerful, subversive narrative.

1.4. Burcu Türker; *Tatlı Limonlar* (2024) [*Sweet Lemons*; *Süße Zitronen* (2016)]:

1.4.1. A Glimpse into Burcu Türker:

Born in 1984 in Erlenbach, Germany, Burcu Türker is a Berlin-based author, comic writer, and illustrator of Turkish descent. Having studied visual

communication with a focus on comics and illustration at the Kassel Art Academy. In 2012, Türker co-founded *Die goldene Discofaust* (The Golden Disco-Fist), a collective of nine female comic artists and photographers. Türker completed her master's degree with her graduation thesis project, *Süße Zitronen*, which was published by Jaja-Verlag in 2016 and was shortlisted as a finalist for the Berthold Leibinger Foundation's comic book award that same year. Originally published in German, the work was translated into Turkish in 2024 and published by Sirtlan Yayınları.

Burcu Türker's debut graphic novel, also her graduation thesis, *Tatlı Limonlar* (2016) tells a mother-daughter story with themes of loss and mourning. Türker depicts how remembering the sweet memories of a lost, beautiful, talented, fighter, and actress mother helps a young artist plagued by nightmares and stuck in an artistic crisis keep up. Focusing on the career left behind for family, the lives separated apart in Türkiye and Germany, and a woman whose life impresses her daughter, Türker reveals the story of the ups and downs of her creative process, the bonds of friendship, and the emotional states of a daughter who lost and miss her mother.

One key element that stands out in Burcu Türker's work is how images and text are contextualized and how colors and visual depictions shape the narrative uniquely. Like the other works analyzed in this thesis, Türker often quits frame density, demonstrating an approach that expands the traditional conventions of graphic novels. As we can see in **Figure 27**, the visual



Figure 27: Tatlı Limonlar, p. 12

storytelling is defined by a dominant palette of red and orange, a chaotic yet harmonious page layout, and fluid illustrations. At the same time, the textual narrative unfolds through a nonlinear plot that moves back and forth in time, intertwining the lives of a mother and daughter.

The story of joyful yet longing-filled memories, conveyed through colors and illustrations, is also reflected in the carefully chosen title of the book. Türker explains that she wanted to illustrate how even the happiest memories of a lost loved one can be paralyzing. According to her, when these emotions become overwhelming, they turn sour like vinegar in a salad. For this reason, the word *Lemons* in the title symbolizes the bond between mother and daughter, while *Sweet*

evokes positive memories, just like the warm color palette of the book (“Burcu Türker,” 2022).

1.4.2. A Self Written in Grief: Mapping Memory and Motherhood

Burcu Türker, in *Tatlı Limonlar*, shares an impressive story that synthesizes the mourning of a daughter experienced after the mother’s loss and the creative crisis of an artist. At a time when being creative is needed the most, in the middle of the overwhelming stress of the deadline of the final project, Türker feels her talent shay away from her. Waking up from a dream that reminds her of the last moment of her mother’s, she starts to pacify herself by remembering and deconstructing the great moment of their lives. Compared to her mother, an extremely talented theater artist and a powerful female character, Türker feels weak in coping with the stress and inadequate in proving her talent.



Figure 28: Tatlı Limonlar, p. 28-9

In a spread dominated by black, white, and orange tones, the scene seen in **Figure 28** shows a girl sitting in a dark room, with her surroundings gradually lighting up as she watches a video of her mother; through this, Türker conveys her deep admiration and longing for her mother, as well as the grief she experiences after her loss. As the little girl of her mother, she admires her mother's charismatic presence. However, she questions how her mother left the theatre and country to establish a family abroad when she does not even cope with the stress and anxiety of an academic duty. Going back and forward in time, comparing the life of her mother and her current emotional struggle, Türker tries to overcome grief and artistic crisis by remembering and reinterpreting the past by sharing the memories with friends who come over to help with the stress she experiences, by taking lessons from her mother's life story. Longing for her mother and desire to feel her mother's presence and support, seeking refuge in beautiful memories of her mother during stressful times, and efforts to return to work by drawing strength from memories of her mother reveal Türker's mental and emotional world. Therefore, this story of mourning and deconstructing memories unveils women's internal difficulties, how they cope with their losses, and the resilience they develop to overcome these difficulties.

Tatlı Limonlar gives another excellent example of how the mother's life and daughter's admiration substantially impact relational self-construction and self-portrait. In the first scene of the story, the mourning, melancholy, and depressive emotions that begin with her dreaming of her mother dying in her sickbed lead Türker to tell her mother's story and to make sense of her own life through this story. Türker depicts herself as both a child who misses and mourns her mother and

a woman who admires her mother's artistic talent and strength against life's struggles.

Owing to their artistic sides, Türker cannot avoid comparing herself to her mother. While she defines her mother as a talented, beautiful, fascinating, strong woman who overcomes difficulties and pursues her desires, she views herself as someone who is not as gifted as her mother, emotionally fragile, and powerless to the challenges in life, who has turned to cigarettes and alcohol to deal with grief. This mother-daughter comparison shows how Türker positions herself in-relation-to her mother while leading her to deconstruct their relationship, recite good memories, and find motivation by remembering her mother's love and belief to keep going. Although the comparison seems to elevate the mother against demoting the daughter at first glance, the

daughter's view of their relative stands is Türker's adventure of finding strength. **Figure 29** shows that her mother's trust, love, and support for her stand out as a source of strength in Türker's self-discovery process, making the comparison a path to create a relational self.

Moreover, by associating herself with her mother's youth, Türker tries to understand her mother's experiences and find a position



Figure 29: Tatlı Limonlar, p. 10

for herself in her current crisis. In the context of the mother-daughter relationship, this comparison causes her to establish a stronger bond with her mother while emphasizing her mother's impact on her identity construction.

1.4.3. Passing the Weight: Generational Stories of Becoming and Grief

In addition to her mother-daughter story, Burcu shares her mother's life story with the reader to facilitate a more profound comprehension of their relationship and affection. Türker details how her mother's career in theatre, life in Germany, and returning to Türkiye affected her family and herself. In particular, her mother's story of searching for her biological mother makes it possible to look at the mother-daughter relationship and relational self-construction from an intergenerational perspective. When Burcu's mother learns that her mother is not her biological mother, her search for a maternal figure to whom she can take refuge, establish closeness, and find emotional support allows Burcu to understand her mother's self-discovery in the past.

As depicted in **Figure 30**, Türker's mother seeks to establish a connection that bridges generations by taking Burcu to visit her biological mother's grave. This act not only



Figure 30: Tatlı Limonlar, p. 63

strengthens Türker's bond with her mother through the shared experience of maternal love but also introduces Türker to the concept of grief for the first time as she witnesses her mother's longing to reconnect with her. Türker's story of intergenerational experiences with mother figures demonstrates how women create a relational self with their mothers while defining their lives and identities.

1.4.4. Embodied Connections: A Mother-Daughter Bond in the Making of a Woman

Echoing the relationship and bond between mothers and daughters explored in earlier examples, *Tatlı Limonlar* presents powerful moments highlighting their intimate and formative interactions. In one such scene, Türker recalls going bra shopping for the first time with her mother, a deeply personal yet rarely discussed milestone of puberty. By depicting this experience, Türker captures a significant moment of physical change, sheds light on how mother-daughter relationships shape a woman's understanding of her own body, and provides a strong example of women becoming subjects in telling their own life stories.

For many, female puberty and bra shopping, often seen as a formal acknowledgment of bodily change, are



Figure 31: *Tatlı Limonlar*, p. 49

accompanied by complex emotions of both shame and excitement. In **Figure 31**, which depicts the time when the mother takes her daughter shopping for her first bra, Türker's anxiety and her mother's enthusiasm take center stage. What stands out is the mother's ability to adapt to her daughter's significant physical transformation while gently easing her anxieties. In many cultures and societies, a young girl's bodily development is often linked to the loss of innocence, as a maturing body is perceived as capable of evoking male desire. This perception fosters an instinct to conceal the body, leading to shame and discomfort surrounding changes like breast development. However, Türker's mother takes a supportive stance, embracing this natural transition without suppressing her daughter's experience. Therefore, Türker's narrative highlights how mother and daughter grow closer through an often unspoken experience: female puberty.

Burcu Türker weaves a deeply personal yet universally resonant story, blending memory, the mother-daughter bond, and the stress-related mental struggles through her distinctive graphic storytelling style. On the one hand, the narrative explores how mourning reshapes memories and intimacy between two women, while on the other, it reveals a woman's journey of self-discovery and how memories intertwine as shared lived experiences within the mother-daughter dynamic. In this way, the book not only pushes the boundaries of traditional graphic storytelling norms but also stands out as a compelling example of how the influence of other women around them shapes women's life experiences.

CONCLUSION

To begin with, this study has explored the emergence and significance of graphical life narratives by women in Turkish literature, examining how they challenge traditional literary forms and offer a unique space for self-representation. Analyzing selected works with a gender-conscious lens has demonstrated how female authors and illustrators use the graphic medium to navigate personal and collective histories, negotiate identity, and engage with broader socio-political discourses. Moreover, by merging visual and textual elements, these works challenge conventional autobiographical and graphical norms, creating hybrid forms that allow for a more fluid and multidimensional storytelling.

In the books this study analyses, women positioned themselves as subjects in their life narratives by drawing on female bodies and including their bodily biological experiences. An essential element that draws attention in these narratives is that these four women make open and detailed statements about the female body and biological experiences, which are generally considered “shameful” in Turkish culture and society. When we look at the initial attempts to write women’s autobiographies in Turkish literature and the development of life narratives, female authors rarely addressed their bodies and issues considered private to discuss in society. In contrast, by telling and drawing female bodies, women’s graphical life narrations present the experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, miscarriage, birth, postpartum, puberty, and sexuality to open a discursive space for women’s publicized bodies. Hence, by telling their stories, these four women resist social codes about the female body and bring subversive approaches to women’s narratives in Turkish literature.

While narrating her bodily experiences of pregnancy and post-pregnancy, Gökçe Yavaş Önal presents a female subject who focuses on her body in the narrative. Bodily experiences of a woman who is breastfeeding, facing body deformations after birth, and dealing with weight, hair, or pain display a prominent body-focused narration and description in her story. Alpar, on the other hand, reveals a bodily experience that is perhaps even difficult for many women to imagine by drawing the scene where her grandmother has a miscarriage through her efforts. To avoid making her grandmother the object of the story, Aslı uses graphic narratives based on actual photographs while narrating Emine Hanım's bodily experiences. With such a narrative, Alpar presents a layered and subversive life narration by conveying her grandmother's bodily experiences through her drawings, making her the subject. Samancı, as well, depicts a female figure who becomes a subject in the narrative by telling her story on the decisions about her own body after a traumatic experience of violence and implementing them. Samancı draws a portrait of a woman who becomes the subject of her story and establishes authority over bodily experiences. Finally, in the story in which Türker describes her physical change experience during puberty and her relationship with her mother, she also becomes a subject of the narration while narrating experiences of her body change and the mother-daughter relationship.

Women telling their life stories allows us to understand how they see and construct their selves. Any physical, psychological, social, or political situation women experience while growing up or in their adult lives paves the way for turning inward and discovering their selves or forming their personalities. Through their life narratives, we can observe how women give meaning to their lives, try to adapt to social expectations, and position themselves according to society. When a woman

tells her story and discusses her relationships with her family and environment, her way of finding a sense of what is happening around her and adapting to expectations reflects her journey of self-discovery. On the one hand, this journey offers women the opportunity to understand themselves and form a personality. Yet, on the other hand, it leads to questioning their place in society, resulting in psychological difficulties. Moreover, women's medical struggles or mental disorders constitute another joint in constructing the self. With the struggles within their minds, women also try to find ways to keep up with everyday life and the rhythm of society.

In effect, when focusing on these example works, the themes of self-discovery, retrospection, and introspection are the typical motifs of almost all. Although female characters depict incompatible or misfit nature in society with a feeling of inadequacy, they turn inward and question themselves, their struggles, or the moments they did not forget to know their present self better. They undergo internal transformation, development, or deconstruction, strikingly coping with mental illnesses, social difficulties, and emotional struggles, and somehow emerge as re-empowered at the end of their stories.

While Yavaş Önal tells us about her anxieties and vulnerabilities, she also shows us the things that comfort her and make her happy. In this respect, she depicts a woman who struggles and is aware of her strong characteristics. Samancı, on the other hand, portrays a woman who has been searching for herself since childhood, confronting sociopolitical issues yet eventually finding herself. Although, at first glance, Alpar's story seems to be a grandchild's story, a grandmother with mental disorders lived an unhappy life before dying, it carries a strong message about how telling the stories of women who have been left behind and made insignificant creates a political discourse and criticism on women's issues. She leaves us with an

essential value by bringing to light the story of her grandmother, an ordinary woman in society, and discussing women's issues through her. Türker, as a daughter and artist who faces the loss of her mother while in the middle of a creative breakdown, transforms her memories, mourning, and remembering into artistic production. Türker's story ends with not only commemorating her mother but also glorifying her as a mother and writing her own success story. These examples show that women's struggles carry both individual and social meaning.

In addition, women shape and construct their identities through continuous interaction, communication, and relationships. The relational self emerges when influenced by their immediate environment, frequently dominated by women and their primary female role models, especially mothers. As reflected in the life stories this study analyses, women not only explore their private lives and journeys of self-discovery but also delve into their relationships with other women, telling shared experiences and memories. Consequently, constructing an identity and getting experience in society as a woman becomes deeply intertwined with the presence of other women. According to their life narrations, these relationships significantly shape women's lives, making female figures within the family central to their narratives and forming their sense of self.

These stories of familial and generational interactions and relationships reveal how women's self-construction and life experiences become shared and transferred stories of lives. When women tell their stories, they also share the stories of women who closely bond to their lives and their women's experiences, like their mothers, sisters, daughters, and grandmothers. While Yavaş Önal emphasizes the dual position of women as being mother and daughter at the same time and its effect on her life, Türker highlights how a mother's life story is essential in making sense of a

daughter's life and depicting the woman's self. Samancı and Alpar reveal complicated and in-depth relationships between women in the family. While Alpar shares her grandmother's challenging life story, she also positions herself in the intergenerational struggle of women in her family history and the dissent against the oppression of women in society. Samancı, on the other hand, narrates how family expectations navigate her relationship with her sister and how it affects the sister's desires and shared struggles in finding the path in life.

Although these narrations convey individual and unique life stories, the social rules, expectations, pressures, and society's intervention in individual experiences contained in women's stories make visible the shared struggles many women face daily. While women tell their own subjective experiences in these narratives, they also highlight the reflexes they encounter in society and express the difficulties of living with a female identity. In this respect, the stories they tell reflect not only their personal experiences but also the experiences of other women who have coped with similar problems, allowing them to develop social and political criticisms of everyday struggles.

Pregnancy, birth, and motherhood stand out as experiences unique to individual adventures of the body and the self, as well as common processes and experiences of socially constructed female identity. For example, giving birth, on the one hand, socially provides women with the identity of the mother; on the other hand, it leads to a search, questioning, and discovery of a new self with their changing bodies. While adapting to changing bodies is complex enough on its own for women, the emergence of the discourses when the pregnant body is exposed in the public sphere deeply affects such a womanly experience.

Alongside presenting unique life stories, women narrating their experiences speak for other women who could not share their stories. In a sense, women establish a communication channel with their women readers through shared but individual life experiences. For example, Yavaş Önal seeks to develop a strong bond with her reader and makes sure that she shares the same concerns and tells similar stories as many women. The introductory sentence “These anxieties belong to all of us!” at the beginning of the book manifests a subjective discovery journey regarding her emotional states while reflecting an understanding that includes the women she addresses in these experiences, aiming to be their voice.

Acknowledging their uniqueness and authenticity, the stories of women who live in the same cultural context highlight similar struggles and experiences, making these stories social and political remarks on women’s lives in Türkiye. From the authority over their bodies to oppression, their desires, life goals, and decisions, women’s stories gather on a common ground of a shared struggle, no matter how distinct their stories are.

In a nutshell, a key finding of this study is that women’s graphic life narratives serve as personal testimonies and acts of resistance against dominant literary and cultural norms. The hybrid nature of this genre-merging text and visual storytelling allows for a more nuanced and accessible form of self-expression that transcends conventional autobiographical structures. Such hybridity enriches Turkish literature and expands the scope of feminist literary discourse by providing an alternative medium through which women articulate their experiences.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes to the growing academic recognition of graphic literature within Turkish literary studies, which has remained largely

overlooked. By highlighting the works of female creators, it emphasizes the necessity of integrating these narratives into mainstream literary and cultural analyses. The study also underscores the importance of fostering a more inclusive literary landscape that values and legitimizes women's self-representations as essential components of national and global storytelling traditions.

Future research could build upon this foundation by examining the intersections between Turkish women's graphic narratives and global feminist movements, exploring how these works resonate with or diverge from international trends. An analysis of their contribution to world literature or their positioning within regional literary contexts, like minor literature, could provide further insights. Moreover, studies on reader reception and the impact of publishing and market dynamics on the accessibility of these narratives could offer valuable perspectives on the evolving status of women's graphic storytelling in Türkiye.

Ultimately, this study brings together and examines graphic life narratives created by women in Türkiye, aiming to explore a previously uncharted area in Turkish literature. Drawing from international research in this field, it highlights a gap in studies that intersect Turkish literature, comics studies, cultural studies, and communication studies, positioning itself among the pioneering works in this domain. By centering women's writing, it contributes to feminist criticism while also shedding light on the limited yet significant examples within Turkish literature and the graphic storytelling landscape. Moreover, it analyzes the characteristics, themes, and unique narrative approaches employed by women in this medium.

Despite the scarcity of graphic life narratives in Türkiye, this study demonstrates the richness of their content, emphasizing their value not only for

literary studies but also for visual research. It provides a foundation for future scholarly work in this area. Examining these works within the Turkish context also underscores Türkiye's place in world literature and highlights the transnational scope and significance of women's narratives. Therefore, this thesis affirms that graphic life narratives are a powerful tool for making women's stories visible and academically acknowledged, while a vital medium for the proliferation of feminist discourse, not only in a regional context but worldwide. Therefore, by continuing to study and promote these works, we contribute to a more prosperous and diverse literary landscape that embraces the transformative power of women's voices, both written and drawn.

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