

TRANSCULTURAL ASPECTS IN ELİF BATUMAN’S FICTION



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PLAGIARISM

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ABSTRACT

This thesis aims at studying Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* from a transcultural perspective. This study examines Elif Batuman's novels from an interdisciplinary perspective combining Wolfgang Iser's philosophical approach to transculturalism, transcultural literary studies as well as Bakhtinian concepts such as polyphony and intertextuality. Benefitting from this framework, this thesis highlights the themes of the representation of national identity, mobility, cultural and linguistic diversity in Batuman's fiction. The study also emphasizes how the protagonist transcends the stable categories related to identity and fiction writing within the framework of transculturalism.

Key words: Transculturalism, transcultural literature, polyphony, intertextuality

ÖZET

Bu tez, Elif Batuman'ın *The Idiot* ve *Either/Or* romanlarını kültür ötesilik teorisi çerçevesinde incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Bu çalışma, Wolfgang Iser'in kültür ötesilik kavramını felsefi yönden ele alan bakış açısını, edebiyatta kültür ötesilik yaklaşımını, Bakhtin'in çok seslilik kavramını ve metinlerarasılık kuramını birleştirerek disiplinlerarası bir yaklaşımla Batuman'ın romanlarını inceler. Bu çerçevede, Batuman'ın romanlarında, ulusal kimliğin temsili, hareketlilik, kültürel ve dilbilimsel çeşitlilik temaları ortaya çıkarılır. Aynı zamanda bu çalışma, ana karakterin kimlik ve roman yazımına dair sabit kategorileri nasıl aştığını kültür ötesilik teorisi çerçevesinde değerlendirir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Kültür ötesilik, edebiyatta kültür ötesilik, çok seslilik, metinlerarasılık

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INTRODUCTION

Transculturalism, originally coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1940 as *transculturation*, refers to the mutual interaction between cultures, rather than a one-sided *acculturation* process. Despite the fact that it was Ortiz who put forward the term, it has been evolving since then and it has been deployed in various disciplines. According to Wolfgang Welsch (1999), the existing concepts of multiculturalism and interculturalism are not enough to explain the conditions of our times. Therefore, it is necessary to set new approaches to be able to comprehend the complex structure of cultures today. At this point, he offers deployment of the word transculturalism pointing out the interconnected structure of cultures today. As Welsch elaborates, transculturalism has two dimensions: macro-level and micro-level. While the former deals with complexities in societies which stem from the coexistence of cultures, the latter focuses on individual domains in which identity is constructed through multiple cultural interactions.

Welsch (1999) does not regard cultures as homogeneous and separate entities, rather they continuously reshape through *external networking*. The interconnectedness of cultures results from the dynamic process of migrations, developing communication systems as well as economic dependencies/independencies. At a micro-level, transculturality is an individual phenomenon. In order to illustrate how transculturalism is observed at a micro-level, Welsh exemplifies Salman Rushdie as a transcultural author whose identity is not shaped by a single homeland. Welsch also makes a distinction between cultural and national identity. He asserts that cultural identity cannot be limited to a national one since one's cultural identity might be a mixture of different aspects of various cultural forms. Also, Welsch emphasizes that transculturalism does not denote the homogenization of societies; on the contrary, he emphasizes the necessity of celebrating diversity and envisions societies in which each individual expresses themselves in their own unique way. He points out that being transcultural is not sameness, in contrast, it is having one's distinctive individual identity.

Transcultural literary studies, on the other hand, dwell on the issues such as the representation of national identities, the coexistence of multiple modes of beings, multicultural environments, translingual practices like code-mixing or translations, and the impact of mobility on characters/authors in literary works. While transcultural

literary analysis deals with these issues, it does not disregard the critical approach of postcolonial theory, rather it mostly borrows the concepts such as *hybridization*, *in-betweenness* or deals with the conditions of diasporas in literary works of cross-cultural authors. Arianna Dagnino (2015) regards transcultural literature as a new form of *literatures of mobility* which includes literary works that are influenced by “migratory flows, wanderlust, travel experiences, diasporic, exile, or postcolonial situations, and more recently, the multiple trajectories of transnational and neonomadic movements” (p. 145). In *Transcultural Identities in Contemporary Literature*, it is stated that our understanding of self is shaped through interaction with others; thus, it is an open and ongoing process. Since identity formation involves fluidity, individual identity persists in changing through interactions with others. It is also emphasized that transculturality was once considered to be a concern of privileged ones in societies; however, it is now regarded as a reality for the majority of the world’s population due to migrations and advancing communication technologies. As a result of the confrontation of diverse groups, each individual in a group constructs a unique identity, identifying with different characteristics of local or global. (Hansen, Llena and Nordin et al., 2013, p. ix-x-xvi) According to Mikhail Epstein (2009), transcultural individuals can redeem themselves from the dependence on not only their native cultures but also on the culture they live in. He defines the situation of transcultural as *being beyond* (p. 332). As Epstein (1999) suggests, any kind of experience involving interconnectedness is valuable from a transcultural perspective. He adds that the central question of transcultural identity is how we change our perception of self in the way of evolving from who we are (p. 94). One might argue that transculturalism prioritizes transformation and fluidity rather than fixed categories of identity. From this perspective, individual identity is not stable and it reshapes through personal experiences and interactions with others.

Drawing on the features of transcultural novels as well as Bakhtinian concepts such as heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism and intertextuality, this study aims at discussing Elif Batuman’s *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* from these standpoints. Batuman is a multilingual Turkish-American novelist and literary scholar, and her novels demonstrate the depth of her cross-cultural identity and creative writing style. In *The Idiot* and its sequel *Either/Or*, Batuman tells the story of the experiences of Selin Karadağ who studies at Harvard. Selin’s enthusiasm for living her life as the literary characters she admires clashes with real life experiences which are mostly painful due

to the difficulty of the transitional stage of growing up. Readers witness the evolving process of the protagonist from the beginning of *The Idiot* to the end of *Either/Or*. While *The Idiot* revolves around the experiences of the heroine in her freshman year, its sequel *Either/Or* takes readers on a journey through the narrator's sophomore year in college. While Selin is more inexperienced and dazzled with the complexities of life in *The Idiot*, *Either/Or* presents Selin as a more grounded character who is gradually constructing herself as a female author. Set in various locations, both of these novels are polyphonic, intertextual and bear several aforementioned qualities of transcultural literature. Batuman uses an innovative style benefitting from genres including autobiography and academic writing and she carefully blends them in her fiction.

The friendship among the characters forms the core of dynamic interaction in Batuman's novels. In "Constructions of Transcultural Subjectivity", Mats Tegmark (2013) emphasizes that transcultural subjectivity goes beyond national identity. Despite the differences related to their cultural background, they share similar human experiences like love, friendship, separation, loss or loneliness (Nordin, Hansen, Llena et al, p. 98). In *Transcultural English Studies*, Mike Phillips (2009) asserts that individual identity formation is determined as individuals engage with the very structure of languages and the interrelationship with national and personal histories (p. 145). From Phillips' perspective, everything we learn, the specific modes of behaviors, family histories as well as the history of the nation we belong to and personal experiences are the factors impacting our identity formation process. All of these features are traced in Batuman's novels through her vivid description of the characters. While each character differs greatly from one another, they also have similar experiences like being in love, being on the move and building friendships.

Since its features mostly intersect with postcolonial and postmodern writing, it is not possible to precisely pinpoint the features of transcultural novels. For this reason, Sissy Helff (2009) indicates the challenge of defining features of transcultural novels, acknowledging the fact that it is a relatively new concept. However, she still clarifies some common features of transcultural literature. According to Helff, a transcultural character continuously doubts himself/herself questioning her/his views and the world around them (p. 83). Contrary to intercultural narratives, these novels mostly depend on personal realities. Helff adds:

A common imagined community is thus lost to the main protagonists, since transcultural characteristics challenge essentialist modes of identity

construction...The narrated worlds often run up against diverse idealized notions of cultural nationalism... conventional concepts of home and gender roles (p. 83).

Different world views are questioned by the protagonists of these novels. According to Helff (2009), transcultural narrative perpetually crosses boundaries through a narrator who challenges the collective identity belonging to a particular community. Also, these border-crossing activities characterize the narrators' lifeworld. Finally, the conventional understanding of home is defied. These characters might feel an attachment to a place that is different from their home or they might prefer not to fit in anywhere at all. Helff points out that storytelling strategies such as designing an unreliable narrator in transcultural novels sometimes enable the author to incorporate metafictional elements within the narrative itself by inserting her/his own views in the novel (p. 83).

Concurring with Helff, Dagnino (2015) also contributes to the description of transcultural novels. She defines the key characteristic of a transcultural novel as follows: "physical or cultural mobility and transformative nature of its fictional characters—together with their ability to re-envisage common situations from alternative points of view—which mainly reflects that of its authors" (p.180). At this point, Dagnino recalls Schoene who envisions transcultural novels to be novels that depict the world rather than particular nations. As well as defining the features of transcultural novels, Dagnino (2015) illustrates the attitude of transcultural authors in five categories: 1) these authors set their novels in multiple places; however, none of these places are exoticized by the narrator. 2) The characters in these novels represent more than one culture and lead a transcultural life. 3) They prefer multiple narrative voices and present their stories involving different perspectives. 4) They use foreign words blending linguistic spaces/cultures in their texts. 5) They generally reject classifying texts according to national literatures (p. 183). She also acknowledges that transcultural authors tend to mix genres defying the traditional classification of them. Dagnino relates the attitudes of transcultural authors with what Rosi Braidotti calls *nomadic subjects*.

In *Metamorphoses*, Braidotti (2002) articulates how subjectivity has changed in the post-industrial era which is marked by postmodernism. She deals with *difference* in a positive way aiming at deconstructing phallogocentric views depending on binaries. While articulating her thoughts, she borrows from Gilles Deleuze's notions of *empirical transcendental* and Luce Irigaray's *sexual difference*. Referring to Deleuze and

Irigaray's philosophy, Braidotti defines a nomadic subject as being mobile, changeable in nature and transitory. As she posits it, becoming is a perpetual interconnectedness (p. 8, 70). In her article, "Writing as a Nomadic Subject" Braidotti (2014) relates the becoming process of nomadic subjects to writing practice. As Braidotti suggests, nomadic writers not only use language as a tool, but they also feel resided as the other in it. As she remarks, creativity requires the riddance of fixed notions of identity. Instead, it is a nomadic process through which writers do not cling to a stable category of identity. Braidotti elaborates that being a nomadic subject requires one to open one's self to possible encounters with the 'outside' as Virginia Woolf does in her writings through the detailed depictions of her observations. As Braidotti remarks, through the mobilization of differences, it is possible to destroy the supremacy of powerful nations. She adds that late postmodernity involves "transculturality, polylingual and multi-cultural social space," that is marked with "nomadic intervention." She defines nomadic intervention as a process of "destabilizing dogmatic, hegemonic, exclusionary power structures" (p. 166-181). She concludes her argument as follows:

The point is not just mere deconstruction, but the relocation of identities on new grounds that account for multiple belongings., ie: a non-unitary vision of a subject. This subject actively...constructs itself in complex and internally contradictory webs of social relations (p. 181).

To conclude, transcultural novels and their authors invite readers to an open space in which all stigmas relating to one's national, cultural or sexual identity are questioned. Walking across languages and cultures, these authors are able to reveal differences as well as similarities, overlapping and opposing features of cultures. These authors also enable readers to explore different perspectives that are shaped in different circumstances and settings. Although mobility is one of the most common features of transcultural novels, Braidotti (2014) emphasizes that not all nomadic writers have to be travelers, the subversion of traditional thinking or locating oneself outside the given culture also defines the nomadic state. Thus, one might conclude that undermining stereotypical representations of various groups based on their nationality, ethnic background or sexual orientation, and moving beyond the notions of fixed identity instead replacing it with fluidity are within the scope of transcultural writing.

Since one of the most defining features of transcultural literature is involving different languages and worldviews in a single text, most transcultural novels are also polyphonic and dialogic in their very nature. Drawing on Bakhtin, Epstein argues that

the world must shift from difference to interference which entails mutual interaction. As Epstein suggests, only when one locates oneself outside, engaging in a dialogue with the other, that different cultures confront thus enriching one another. This encounter does not result in mixing; however, it leads to a different understanding (Epstein, 2004, as cited in Rollins, 2013, p.260). Referring to Bakhtin, Michael Bell (2004) indicates that the overlapping features of cultures resemble “a floating dialogue” (Bell, 2004, as cited in Bostad, Brandst, Sigred Everson, Faber et al, p. 2). The idea of a dialogical encounter of cultures and the fluidity of cultural identity resulting from these encounters also lie at the heart of the transcultural approach. Therefore, it is significant to scrutinize Bakhtinian terms such as heteroglossia, dialogism and polyphony to better understand the structure of transcultural novels.

According to Bakhtin (1986), literary works are closely linked with cultural history and inseparable from cultural context. The boundaries between the various areas of cultures are ambiguous and the effects of these cultures are best observed in individual areas. As Bakhtin elaborates, the attempt to encapsulate literature in a single era or isolate it from cultural context is a vain attempt. To put it another way, literary works ripen through time transcending the confines of our own period. A single literary work cannot exist without bearing traces from the past as well as negotiating with the future. Cultures are never disclosed entities; on the contrary, they spread through other epochs. As Bakhtin clarifies, achieving creative understanding is only possible when one locates oneself outside the norms of a given culture. Meaning can only be achieved through a dialogue with the other. This dialogical interaction among cultures as well as the coexistence of various cultural elements enrich the structure of a literary work.

In his seminal work *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin (1981) defines the novel as a form which involves diverse languages as well as conversations in different social circles. As he puts it, heteroglossia is one of the main principles of modern novels and a novel is the representation of different voices in a creative way. According to Bakhtin, people representing different groups and specific modes of expression are blended in a novel. The interaction among these various utterances and speech styles, which he also calls dialogism, forms the core of the stylistics of novels (p. 262-3). As Ivanov (1999) puts it in his article, heteroglossia is the opposite of monoglossia in which a single language dominates a text. On the contrary, a heteroglot novel involves not only different dialects but also various speech patterns of individuals existing under a unified language.

The dialogic nature of words creates an artistic discourse within a novel; therefore, the style of a text is determined by internal and external relationships. According to Bakhtin (1981), language resembles our physical environment with its non-unitary structure. Social life and history create an abstract national language containing various worlds and ideologies, which are expressed through “semantic and axiological content” and each is represented by respective sounds (p. 288). Languages encapsulate more than a fixed, stable grammatical structure. As Bakhtin puts it, languages involve one another and it is not possible to juxtapose them since one way or another they penetrate each other (p. 291). While languages are not self-enclosed spheres, novels that include different world views and languages cannot be considered closed systems, either. Literary language is not a sole, closed system, rather it is a unity of various languages contacting and impacting one another. Namely, languages, as well as genres, persist give and take relationships with other genres including stylistic and linguistic characteristics of these genres (p. 295- 321). The heteroglot nature of the novel creates *double-voiced discourse* mixing the voices of the characters and that of the authors.

After he elaborates on the dialogic system and the heteroglot structure in novels, Bakhtin scrutinizes the differences between an epic hero and a novel hero. The hero of a novel does not serve society and they are not necessarily the representative of lofty ideals. These characters are the embodiment of collective speech, communication and development. They don't rise upon the ideals of society, rather they present their worldview. One might argue that Bakhtin paves the way to what we understand from the postmodern novel/character today. Authors portray hybrid characters and this hybridity in novels is designed by authors consciously with a creative understanding. In a novel, one observes the fusion of languages, cultures as well as a mixture of different eras. In novels, a natural culture is not a self-contained, closed system and bildungsroman, especially autobiographical ones -which are also a subject of this study- are the perfect representatives of heteroglossia containing everyday speech (p. 340, 365).

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin (1984) expounds on the features of novels examining Dostoevsky's works and characters as great representatives of the modern novel. In this work, Bakhtin extends his views on key terms like multi-voice, polyphony and heteroglossia which are the components of what is named intertextuality by his successors. According to Bakhtin, Dostoyevsky is the originator of the

polyphonic novel and he defines it to be “a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses” (p. 6-8). While each unique voice is representing itself, their world views create a real polyphony. By its nature, a novel is a dialogized structure and dialogue penetrates the structure of novels. Although diversity in language and dialects remain as significant components, dialogic angle, through which styles are counterposed, is what really matters in a polyphonic novel (p. 182). In a polyphonic novel, each representation has an equal value, different views are not more important than one another; therefore, there is a constant interaction among the ideas: “The polyphonic novel is dialogic... Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure... They are an almost universal phenomenon, permeating all human speech and all relationships and manifestations of human life” (p. 40). Bakhtin defines dialogism as a universal phenomenon, not attributing it to a single culture or language.

The components related to the dialogic nature of texts that are explained above establish the foundation of the term intertextuality, which was coined by Julia Kristeva. Intertextuality aims at revealing the interconnectedness of other texts and genres in the body of a single work. From an intertextual perspective, “All texts are intertexts because they refer to, recycle and draw from the preexisting texts. Any work of art, for Kristeva, is an intertext which interacts with the other texts, rewrites, transforms or parodies them” (Zengin, 2016, p. 300). As Graham Allen (2000) suggested, intertextuality is also a way of understanding cultures and intertextual reading enables readers to reveal connections among cultures as well as literatures (p. 5). Therefore, intertextuality provides a lens through which readers can see the interconnectedness of various cultural products and witness how the author transforms these materials into a new narrative. Reading a text from an intertextual perspective is also relevant to the transcultural reading experience since transcultural literature mostly includes literatures and literary traditions of different nations. Due to the fact that transcultural authors are in touch with multiple national literatures, this diversity becomes a part of their literary works. Transcultural authors might combine various elements of literary genres as well as the contents of other texts in their novels.

The first chapter of this study discusses the theoretical background from the development of transcultural theory to its deployment in transcultural literary studies today. The second chapter focuses on the issues related to national identity. Most of the characters in Batuman’s fiction come from different parts of the world, meeting in a university setting. Batuman reveals national stereotypes as well as prejudices directed

towards others. Selin confronts these attitudes not only in America and Turkey but also in other countries she has visited. In accordance with one of the qualities of transcultural novels, neither America nor Turkey is depicted in a romanticized way. She does not favor American or Turkish attitudes, rather she points out that regardless of their socioeconomic status, people encounter certain prejudices in all societies. The second subsection discusses how the main characters transcend the fixed categories of identity questioning the nature of belonging to a particular place. The third subsection has attempted to analyze Harvard as a transcultural space being the intersection for people coming from different national and cultural backgrounds.

In the third chapter, the focus shifts to one of the most important themes of transcultural literature: mobility. In Batuman's fiction, the characters are on the move, perpetually crossing borders physically and virtually. In accordance with Braidotti's concept of a nomadic subject, Batuman does not only do this by portraying characters who are traveling from one place to the other continuously, she also directs the attention of the readers to different destinations all around the world from a university setting. Throughout the novels, Selin and her friends, most of whom are also cross-cultural characters, interrogate cultures, the nature of languages and national histories. Also, the countries that are visited, their impacts on the characters as well as the symbolic significance of these places will be analyzed from a transcultural perspective.

The fourth chapter is centered on linguistic elements existing in Batuman's novels. In one of her interviews, referring to Bakhtin, Batuman expresses that being proficient in more than one language, opening a space for youth language and implementing these features in a single national language add layers and richness to a novel (Oreskovic, 2017). In her novels, Batuman brings together people from different walks of life, cultural backgrounds, and people whose native languages/world views are vastly different from one another. Both novels include various languages, mainly English and Turkish, as well as Hungarian, French and Russian expressions. There are also references to Creole and Pidgin which are formed as a result of a combination of some features of different languages. Batuman's novels contain linguistic terms, academic language, philosophical terms, youth language, occupational language, idiomatic Turkish expressions as well as daily English. She continuously moves among various modes of expression creating harmony in her novels. The fourth chapter of this study has also attempted to analyze intertextual references which also reflect the transcultural mode of Batuman's fiction. In the section dedicated to generic features,

the focus is how Batuman shapes her novels destroying the boundaries of genres. She carefully blends fiction and non-fiction in the body of her novels transcending fixed categories of genre. Regarded to be autofictional in their essence, Batuman's novels reveal much about her reading and writing experience as an author as well.

At this point, since Batuman primarily elaborates the theory of the novel as well as the general plot of *The Idiot* in her debut book *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*, which also contains elements of fiction, it will also be mentioned in this study. Published in 2010, *The Possessed* brings together grad school life, Batuman's favorite Russian novelists, literary theory and multiple settings from the West to the East such as Stanford, St. Petersburg, Tashkent and Florence. Seven years later, when *The Idiot* was published, Batuman explained that she had already written *The Idiot* earlier than *The Possessed*; however, she revised it years later and finally, the novel was published in 2017. Therefore, one might argue that *The Possessed* not only foreshadows the content of *The Idiot*, but also reveals how the author approached writing a novel meshing several generic qualities. Batuman's novels build a bridge between canonical works and the narrator's own writing experience.

Although there are lots of intertextual references in *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*, some specific works stand out that she compares from different national literatures such as French, American, English and most dominantly Russian. Analyzing these literary works from a critical eye and primarily focusing on the representation of female characters, Selin attempts to construct her identity as a female author. As well as using intertextual references to pay homage to her favorite novels, Batuman also subverts patriarchal discourse in these novels through her writing experience. She illustrates how women were eventually oppressed and suffered in these canonical works. She demonstrates this to the readers by selecting examples from various national literatures. For this reason, the intertextual references in Batuman's fiction not only reflect the polyphonic structure of her novels, but also become significant components of her transcultural narrative.

Lastly, the final part discusses Batuman's novels from the lens of a Turkish reader, who reads these novels in English. Although the narrator translates most of the Turkish conversations into English, some of the expressions are difficult to translate since they are culture-bounded references. In this regard, it has been intended to highlight the significance of these references from the point of view of a Turkish reader. All in all, the present study explores the themes of individual and national identity,

mobility, cultural and linguistic diversity in Batuman's fiction in the light of transcultural approach.



CHAPTER ONE

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1 The Development of Transcultural Theory

Transculturalism, which springs from culturology, emerged as a new form of understanding the intricate structures of cultures. As the prefix *trans-* suggests, the term denotes going beyond the preexisting idea of cultures observing the dynamic nature of cultures today at macro and micro levels. The term is not totally considered to be isolated from other cultural approaches like multiculturalism and interculturalism, rather it has developed benefitting from the critical approach of them. The transcultural theory has been used in disciplines from various fields from teaching, anthropology, and sociology to literature. However, the challenge in utilizing the transcultural approach is that there is no fixed definition of the concept. The term *transculturation* was first launched by anthropologist Ortiz (1940) in his *Cuban Counterpoint*. He asserted that it is impossible to define cultural engagement from a single perspective as *deculturation* or *acculturation*, rather there is a mutual influence among cultures that are in a relationship, and this two-way process leads to the emergence of a new culture.

Although Ortiz launched the term *transculturation*, it is German philosopher Welsch who establishes the concept of transculturalism. In his essay “Transculturality: The Puzzling Form of Cultures Today”, Welsch (1999) asserts that the inner structure of cultures today has become more complex because the world is much more connected today than ever. Thus, the classic definition of culture does not suffice to explain the existing condition of cultures anymore (p. 2). Interculturalism and multiculturalism are criticized to a certain degree by Welsch since these approaches treat cultures as closed systems and totally separate spheres. Welsch takes up the concept from two dimensions: macro and micro levels. At a macro-level, transculturalism refers to the diversity in societies. Whether it is because of migration waves or colonial powers that force people to leave their homelands, it is not possible to regard cultures as mono-structures. According to Welsch, cultures are not homogenous; therefore, it is not possible to regard them with a separatist approach. On the contrary, they coexist and they are interconnected transcending national borders because of migratory flows, advanced communication technologies and financial dependencies.

As Welsch suggests, cultures which are considered to be totally different are dealing with global problems which result from injustices, environmental issues, and human rights violations. He states that the most defining characteristic of cultures today

is *hybridization* since nothing is foreign owing to the connectedness among cultures. On the other hand, Welsch elaborates that cultural identity cannot be merely limited to one's national identity; hence, one's identity formation might be a mix of different aspects of various cultures (p. 5). As for Welsch, we can trace transculturalism back in history as well as in most valuable art works that were created in places other than artists' homeland, under the influence of different cultural confrontations. He demolishes the separation between *I* and *the other* asserting that the hatred towards others is actually the hatred towards ourselves. He defines future cultures and individuals as follows: "Future culture would be one of intermixing, and the future person a polycultural nomad" (p. 8). While clarifying transculturalism, Welsch emphasizes that he does not refer to the dismissal of diversity; in contrast, he asserts a new type of diversity which emerges from the infiltration of cultures. He likens cultures to webs interconnected to one another. Being transcultural is not equal to global uniformity, in contrast, it means having and reflecting one's unique identity which is not constrained to fixed notions of national identity. The term does not donate to isolation and conflict, it rises from entanglement, exchange and interaction rather than separation (p. 10). Therefore, societies are not monocultural, they are evolving in a way that they transcend themselves through interconnectedness.

Viewing cultures from a mutual perspective is also significant for the deconstruction of Eurocentrism. Referring to Welsch, Gisela Welz (2009) explains that the dynamic nature of cultures makes it impossible to centralize modernity as Western. Western cultures cannot be regarded as the center of the world, the dichotomy between the West and the East is demolished. Although understanding cultures with respect to power or hierarchical relationships is still valid and valuable, transculturalism adds another perspective beyond these ones (p. xi-xii). In the same vein, Mike Phillips (2009) also emphasizes that understanding injustice and discrimination in societies is necessary; however, we have to go beyond it to really understand the society we live in. Not only does the hybridization of societies happen through technologies and migration at a macro-level, but also identity formation is more complex in the contemporary world. Identity, as we can observe it today, is shaped through different patterns. As Welz points out both societies and the individuals living in these communities are multicultural (Welz, 2009, p. 15). Individuals tend to bond with groups that they are not considered to be a part of or they adopt some qualities of these in their personal identity. However, it is emphasized that transculturalism is not a uniformization process, it

celebrates diversity which is created by differences. On the other hand, Welz (2009) refers to anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, who likens cultures to boxes including lots of elements in them. As Hannerz points out that there must be a distinction between the definition of the dynamic nature of cultures and globalization. While the former entails the expansion of the world powers, the latter involves the interaction among different groups that defy the national borders (p. 38). In another article, Hannerz (1990) asserts that the boundaries drawn between cultures are arbitrary. From this perspective, one cannot separate cultures as traditional or modern since both dissolve in each other. Hannerz adds, in our postmodern world, authenticity is unobtainable and has to undergo deconstruction. Thus, there is a parallelism between the postmodernist idea, which stresses the impossibility of originality and transcultural stance. In this new era, the boundaries between art and culture are blurred; likewise, it is not easy to distinguish art and commerce. It reminds Jean Baudrillard's concept of *Simulacra and Simulation*. According to Baudrillard (1997) reality is copied and reproduced countless, namely, reality is *hyperreal*. The real is not achievable anymore, we constantly interact with copies in a hyper space. Different from what Baudrillard asserts, transculturalists believe that this continuous engagement among cultures ultimately leads to the emergence of new cultures in which separate units preserve their uniqueness and diversity. On an individual basis, our identity is also reshaped through the dynamic relationship with the nature of languages, specific modes of behavior, and the things we learn (Phillips, 2009, p. 145). However, rather than being endless copies of one another, people diverge from others meshing different features of cultures on their bodies.

Mikhail Epstein and Ellen E. Berry (1999) define transcultural as a subcategory of culturology. As they emphasize the word transculture has no definite meaning, it is used in various disciplinary contexts including postmodern theory, postcolonial studies and other fields. Epstein draws an analogy between Bakhtinian understanding of culture and transculturalism. He cites Bakhtin as follows:

[t]he study of culture (or some area of it) at the level of system and at the higher level of organic unity: open, becoming, unresolved and predetermined, capable of death and renewal, transcending itself, that is, exceeding its own boundaries (Bakhtin, 1986, as cited in Epstein, p. 17).

It might be concluded that Bakhtin's description of culture is a relevant concept in the process of the development of transculturalism. According to Bakhtin, cultures are in perpetual connection with one another and they are open to renewal and change through

time. As Epstein elaborates, culturology creates a free space and alternatives beyond cultural practices; thus, it does involve transcendence rather than opposition (p. 21). Epstein and Berry distinguish multiculturalism and transculturalism. As they suggest, both of these approaches dislodge the view of culture as unitary and monolithic. While multiculturalism emphasizes the differences, the focus of transculturalism is the insufficiency and incompleteness that lie at the core of all cultures.

According to Epstein (2009), the concepts of multiculturalism are not abandoned, rather they pave the ground for the emergence of transculturalism by focusing on diversity. At this point, it just adds another layer in which the diversity is conceived in a constructive way. In parallel with Welsch, Epstein (1999) points out the emergence of the concept at an individual level. Be it racially, sexually or ideologically, most people find themselves outside the norms of any given culture. Transcultural is interpersonal and collaborative. Being transcultural is enduring the physicality of existing cultures and being open to transcendence. It means to move beyond one's inborn identity through self-destruction, self-transformation and interference with other identities. As well as endless encounters with others, films, books, and all other sign systems are created exactly for the purpose of undermining fixed notions that are dictated by societies. People complement each other from their differences, not because they are alike, but because they are distinct (p. 25-93).

As Berry (1999) puts forward, the reasons such as the migration of different groups like laborers and intellectuals, communication technologies, mobility for economic reasons, political upheavals and strict nationalism led to the deterritorialization of cultures, which results in the emergence of new, hybrid cultures (p. 122). The identity of a global subject is shaped by mobility and fragmentation. According to Epstein, apart from compulsory circumstances which force groups to migrate, many people today want to experience other cultures be it through the internet or travelling. Despite gravitating around their own cultures, they try to counterbalance it through encounters with others. An increasing number of people are social media users or migrants; that way, new sources are available to many people which ultimately brings about new worlds (Appadurai, 1990, as cited in Berry, p. 148). Epstein demonstrates the electronic web as a new mode of communication that connects individuals. People from different parts of the world share and discuss critical issues that severely affect millions of people around the world, and marginalized groups find free/safe spaces to support each other. This new engagement creates a new culture that

affects people all around the world. The mutual engagement among groups leads to an emergence of a new culture that is not disconnected from existing critical perspectives, rather develops further growing out of them. Fredric Jameson believes that postmodernism accelerates the process of decentering cultural differences, thereby envisioning a common ground for all people, a decentralized space (Jameson, 1993, as cited in Berry, 1999, p.171). From this perspective, not only the dominant cultures, but all cultures are equally important and valuable. Once we step outside the given one, we walk through the new horizon called “no culture”. Merab Mamardashvili uses the term “no culture,” which refers to a Bakhtinian outsideness that allows humans to transcend genetic limitations. He also states being transcultural is not betraying his home culture. He moves to that new space, which relates to all cultures as they are related to nature (Mamardashvili, 1992 as cited in Epstein, 2009, p. 335). To conclude, the aim of the transcultural approach is not to demolish or erase cultural symbols, ways of life, family traditions and so forth; on the contrary, it claims to enrich them making them more visible, revealing cultures not as closed spheres, but as open entities.

1.2 Tracing Transculturalism in Literature

The transcultural perspective is mostly applied in the analyses of the texts of expatriate writers because it is easier to discern cultural diversity in their texts. In these texts, it is easy to trace language shifts, the diversity of different cultures and perspectives. Dagnino (2011) suggests that the term does not refer to an ideological perspective, rather it postulates building a form of identity which centers around an individual’s resistance against the power dynamics that are imposed on individuals by “global capitalism and nation states in the age of mobility.” She describes transculturality as a neo-nomadic, micro-level structure. While she considers that transcultural theory differs from postcolonial theory, she also emphasizes that it does not disregard the issues of exploitation and hegemony. She adds that transcultural fiction goes beyond postcolonialism; however, it still involves it (p. 6-11). Transcultural literary studies rise upon the basic principles of origins of the term, blending and transcending the main elements of postcolonial studies.

In another study about transcultural literature, being aware of the difficulty in labelling transcultural novels, Dagnino (2015) remarks that transcultural authors mostly include different settings in their novels enabling readers to move among these locations; however, these locations are not exoticized, rather they are reflected from the broad perspective of the author. The characters in these novels generally have cross-

cultural identities and transcultural lives. To illustrate, these characters might live in multiple places or speak more than one language. The authors of transcultural literature present different languages blending these cultural and linguistic spaces.

Transcultural authors tend to undermine the understanding of national literature, positioning themselves outside a specific geographical literature (p. 183). As Dagnino elaborates one of the key features of a transcultural novel is that these novels present “plural identities through a plurality of voices. Transcultural novels tend to display a plurivocal perspective: they look at different, often complex aspects or concerns of life from multiplicity of angles” (p. 186). Or, the authors of these novels subtly expose the interplay among the characters with multiple identities. Transcultural authors are mostly bilingual, and sometimes polylingual, and these authors are also capable of revealing overlapping and differing points of cultures that they have connections. As Dagnino puts forward, the protagonists of transcultural novels reflect distinctive views in a self-reflective, unique way. They mediate through different languages as well as different world views. Dagnino emphasizes that these characters cannot be defined as restricted to their national or cultural background since their perspective transcends the constraints of their national identity (p. 189).

Another significant feature of transcultural literature is that these authors also create a fusion or transcend genres, “fiction and nonfiction, auto/biography, and novelistic narration” (p. 4). The authors of transcultural literature tend to use metafictional devices in their texts such as the author’s intrusion in the text (p. 82-3). To put it in another way, they defy both the limits of languages and genres forming their literature as dialogic structures. As Helff (2009) posits, transcultural novels tend to have protagonists who distance themselves from any definitions of an essentialist mode of identity. Their perspective mostly affects the course of the whole narrative. It is possible to observe an emphasis on individual realities rather than groups and this feature differs transcultural novels from intercultural ones. In these novels, characters question differencing world views. Also, the protagonists tend to challenge idealized notions of identity, related to one’s national background and gender. In these novels, both the narrator and readers constantly cross boundaries among spaces. In a transcultural novel, the narrator mostly scrutinizes and reveals problematic issues related to national identity. The narrator is able to see inconsistencies which lie at the heart of cultures from an objective perspective.

Nordin, Hansen and Llena (2013) define transculturality as a productive stage of the identity formation process which results from interactions. Identity is not merely monocultural, instead, it is fluid and constantly in a state of flux. It transforms individuals as they interact with one another. Hence, daily confrontations and transnational experiences contribute to the formation of individual identity. They refer to Welsch who considers that transculturality involves an inclusive attitude. Individuals discover the foreign in themselves by comprehending others. Thanks to this interconnectedness, these characters' identities are multidimensional blending both local and global (p. ix-xvi). As a result, literary works which involve characters who migrate, travel, or live in multicultural environments develop their personalities and world views by gaining a better understanding of the world.

Helff observes that transcultural identities specifically appear in cosmopolitan settings where individuals develop their identities bringing together features of different collective identities (Helff, 2009, as cited in Houswitschka, 2013, p. 73). One can draw an analogy between this view and Levinas's perspective on identity construction. Levinas explains the position of *the other* through our identity construction process in a philosophical context. *The other* contributes to the understanding of an individual who transcends himself/herself. As he puts it, there is always a desire for the other (Levinas, as cited in Eagleton, 2009, p. 231). This desire fosters communication among different groups in cultures via the internet or multicultural environments. As Levinas argues: "The recurrence to oneself cannot stop at oneself, but goes to the hither side of oneself. I exist through the other and for the other, but without this being alienation: I am inspired" (Levinas, 2006, p. 114). The idea of constructing oneself through the other is not an alien notion for scholars who research transculturalism as well. Only through interaction with others, do individuals shape their identity. However, transcultural perspective does not completely separate *I* and *the other*, rather they dissolve in each other as a continuum.

While some theorists focus on the features of transcultural novels, Alastair Pennycook (2007) points out the position of the English language from the transcultural perspective. While English is associated with power and destruction, the fact that it is widely spoken makes the position of English more complex. Pennycook relates the position of English to transculturalism. English is not only a language associated with globalism, but it is also a language of resistance and a medium for the articulation of defiance and change. This quality of English enables the emergence of new cultures that

are shaped by various groups. Being a global language and medium of instruction in most schools, English is rather an open area where different cultural fragments are blending, thereby creating an alternative cultural composition. The artistic works in English also lay the ground for the emergence of new modes of expression that go beyond the existing cultural and linguistic patterns. In a novel in English, especially if it contains various other languages in it, fusions of the elements of various languages are open to intermingle in the same narrative.

Transcultural literary studies also benefit from the terms such as *hybridity*, *in-between* and *third space* which are widely employed in postcolonial studies. These terms are generally used in a positive and transformative way since they are considered to be the reality of cultures today. As Homi K. Bhabha (1994) suggests, today, we define everything with theories starting with the prefix post- which refers to a time the past and present are flowing together (p. 2). As he argues, the fact that people moving away from traditional categories of class and gender led to awareness regarding identity categories such as gender, race or generation (p. 2). Thus, individual subjectivity has undergone a transformation. Bhabha uses the term *in-between spaces* to provide a ground for the articulation of a new form of self. He quotes from African-American writer Renée Green who states, “I wanted to make shapes or set up situations that are kind of open... My work has a lot to do with a kind of fluidity... not making a claim to any specific or essential way of being” (p. 4). Drawing on Green’s stairwell reference, Bhabha clarifies that binary oppositions are replaced by an understanding that perceives identity as multilayered. As Bhabha puts it, “boundary becomes the place from which something begins its presencing... ambivalent articulation of the beyond” (p. 7). According to Bhabha, *beyond* is an intervening space which involves the present and future (p. 10). Bhabha states the notion of pure identity has left its place to a kind of hybridity that transcends borders (p. 7). While Bhabha conceptualizes these terms from a postcolonial perspective, Welsch attributes them to the quality of being the reality of the highly hybridized world. From transcultural lenses, hybridity is defined as confluence and the state of constant becoming. It is not a stable point rather it reshapes itself perpetually through interaction. Roy Sommer attributes a positive connotation to hybridity in the transcultural frame seeing it as a counter argument for so-called exclusive national identities (Sommer, 2001, as cited in Helff, 2009, p. 80). Barbara Scaff (2009) remarks that *hybridity* has evolved into a positive term. It indicates *third place* where cultural elements encounter and transform each other. She refers to Salman

Rushdie and Hanif Kureishi whose works are products of creativity and potentiality rather than reflections of displaced migrants (p. 281). In conclusion, the deployment of terms which are related to postcolonial studies is very common in transcultural analyses; therefore, these terms have been used in specific parts of this study as well.

1.3 The Theory of Intertextuality

Another term which is utilized in transcultural studies is *intertextuality*, which denotes the existence of other texts in a single work. While some academicians focus on marking cultural linkages in texts that are products of different cultures, others reveal how the dominant discourse of intertextual texts is subverted in a text of a transcultural author. In her article “Transcultural Perspectives in Caribbean Poetry” Sabrina Brancato (2009) illustrates how intertextuality is utilized by Caribbean authors as a tool to “establish a dialogue with the metropolitan tradition” (p. 236). In some studies, intertextuality or rewriting is used as a response to existing stereotypes in canonical works of literature.

Drawing on Bakhtinian concepts like dialogism, heteroglossia and polyphony, Julia Kristeva (1980) first used the term intertextuality in her essays “The Bounded Text” and “The Word, Dialogue and Novel”. As she puts it, “semiotic practices are translinguistic,” whereby they function across the languages retaining their own particular presence. She describes the text:

...as a translingual apparatus that redistributes the order of language by relating communicative speech, which aims to inform directly, to different kinds of anterior or synchronic utterances... It is a permutation of texts, an intertextuality: in the space of a given text, several utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another (p. 36).

She defines texts as consequences of a productive process in which meaning is constructed and deconstructed. In a novel, one can trace the fusion of different utterances and see the novel as a unity only by stepping outside it, defining its relationship with other utterances. As Kristeva explains, oral culture penetrates written texts and she also names this process as “transcription of speech” (p. 54). While Kristeva is conceptualizing intertextuality, she follows Bakhtin, who defines a text to be, “an intersection of textual surfaces rather than a point (a fixed meaning), a dialogue among several writings” (p. 65). Bakhtin also states “...any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (p. 66). As Kristeva puts it, the inclusion of other texts is a compulsory process while an author

is creating a new text; in addition, this new text serves as a response to other texts. This two-way relationship between various texts leads to ambivalence. Authors use other texts in their narrative transforming them in an innovative way; however, this process of merging and transforming leads to ambivalence (p. 73). Multiple texts intersect in one text, which requires them to be analyzed considering their referents to reveal the ambivalent nature of texts.

In *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva (1984) emphasizes the difference between intertextuality and studying sources. She tries to frame the term intertextuality which requires texts to have transpositional features. She asserts that intertextuality is the transposition of several sign systems (p. 59-60). As it was mentioned earlier, it is impossible to attribute words to a single meaning; they are always incomplete and plural involving many different meanings. As Barthes (1977) puts it, a text cannot exist without involving other texts in it, rather it is “multi-dimensional space” (p. 142). Thus, all texts are intertextual due to the impossibility of writing a totally original work.

While theorists like Bakhtin, Kristeva and Barthes theorize intertextuality, it is Gérard Genette who scrutinized the term in detail demonstrating how to apply intertextuality to a literary text. In *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, Genette (1997) uses the term *transtextuality* to define all relationships, be it explicit or concealed, with other texts. Transtextuality subsumes five categories. One of them is *intertextuality*, which means the existence of one text in another one. Intertextuality is practised through quoting, which might appear in a text through either direct references or without them. Another common application of intertextuality is *allusion*, which is a less explicit form of referring to another text. *Paratext* involves the application of signals such as titles and forewords, namely anything that is outside the main body of the text (p. 3). Another category which is a significant form of intertextuality is *architextuality*. It is not easy to determine architextuality, which is related to generic qualities because it is mostly silent and hard to figure out in a text (p. 4). Although Genette explains five categories of transtextuality, he warns readers about not labelling them as totally separate units since these categories mostly overlap (p. 8). In addition, Genette defines *self-pastiche* as the “stylistic or thematic imitation” that is made based on the previous works of the authors (p.125-7). Genette also adds that self-pastiche can only be considered as a genre if the author applies it intentionally and it requires a degree of stylistic individuality (p. 125).

After framing intertextuality in detail, Genette introduces a term called

autofiction, which is also one of the key terms for the analysis of Batuman's fiction since Batuman's works are regarded under this category. While analyzing Proust's narrative, Genette uses the term autofiction. Genette states, "We know-and Proust knows better than anyone-that this work is not true autobiography either...What to call this genre...The best term would doubtlessly be that used by Serge Doubrovsky to designate his own narrative: autofiction" (Genette, 1997, as cited in Sabatos, 2022, p. 374). In *Palimpsests*, Genette explains the term autofiction and analyzes Proust's works as a representation of autofiction. Although the term intertextuality has been debated by different researchers since the 1960s, it is Genette who provides a comprehensive classification of the term; for this reason, his terminology will shed light on the intertextual analysis of this study.



CHAPTER TWO

MOVING BEYOND IDENTITIES

2.1 Representation of National Stereotyping and Prejudices

In *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*, reading experience, friendship, love, mobility and growing up are outstanding themes; however, the issues regarding national identities are not ignored, rather they are smoothly blended into the narrative. References regarding one's national background especially stand out in *The Idiot*. In daily conversations, characters attempt to discover about each other's homeland scrutinizing national histories from a critical perspective. In Batuman's fiction, characters coming from various cultural backgrounds explore the overlapping and contrasting features of cultures that they belong to. Svetlana with whom Selin likes discussing a variety of topics from family histories to art, philosophy, languages and love, comes from Serbia in the former Yugoslavia. Ivan, with whom Selin spends hours discussing a wide range of topics, is Hungarian. Juho is a Finnish friend, with whom she likes having conversations on topics such as the similarities among the languages in Ural-Altaic language family. Riley is an American friend who has never left America, whereas Riley's friend Lucas, who Selin sympathizes with, spends most of his holidays overseas. Lucas also loves reading and discussing novels just like Selin, and his parents also grew up in a different country like Selin's parents. From the Turkish club, Selin becomes friends with Şahin with whom she enjoys having conversations. All of these and other characters carry their own perspectives to the university setting, opening their views and features of their cultures for others.

When they meet, characters often discuss particular features of cultures and languages they relate to. It is observable that there is no central culture throughout the novel. The center is destabilized and deconstructed in accordance with the postmodern idea of culture. As Lyotard (1984) articulates, postmodernism moves away from the dominance of specific cultures and narratives. In parallel with the postmodern approach, the center is destabilized in Batuman's fiction as well. The characters both emphasize the overlapping and differing features of cultures, and they illustrate the nation-based prejudices that people hold against one another. While he is framing the concept of transcultural identity in his analysis of Monica Ali's *In the Kitchen*, Christoph Houswitschka (2013) indicates that the close interaction among people in cosmopolitans causes individuals to stop supporting any given national identity in a traditional way. They do not form an understanding of the other in an exclusive way; in

contrast, the other serves as a mirror to form their transcultural identity. The existence of the other defines the identity of a group, which ultimately creates a sense of community (p.80). Svetlana's attitude towards her mother about their national identity is in accordance with Houswitschka's perspective.

When Svetlana's mother tells Selin how they played and danced in a Turkish cemetery when they were children, Svetlana gets angry stating that it is not a proper thing to tell a Turkish person. Svetlana's mother expresses that she has good intention adding Turks are respected enemies. Svetlana remarks, "Like the Serbs in Bosnia? I just can't believe you're talking about the Turks, as if it's the greatest thing in the world to be a Serb now" (Batuman, 2017, p. 97). Svetlana acknowledges the fact that in comparison, most nations are not better than the others, implying that she is not proud of belonging to one. In Batuman's fiction, most of the characters, who are aspiring intellectuals, approach nations from a broader perspective, indicating bloody histories of nations during the conversations. Throughout the novels, it is possible to observe that histories of nations, personal experiences and travelling among these narratives are intermingled becoming an important component of individual identities. However, Batuman also reveals that biased thinking still prevails among people in societies that she has an organic tie or that she travels to.

In accordance with the transcultural approach, the protagonist Selin never centralizes or exoticizes nations. She carefully portrays the inner complexities and insufficiencies of societies she is in touch with. National histories and prejudices set by each nation towards the other emerge as a part of the whole narrative. Although it is not highlighted by the author, most of the characters face stereotypes about their national identity. A conversation between a Russian clerk at a shop in Boston and Svetlana is significant in this respect. Because of the fact that Svetlana speaks Russian well, the clerk presupposes that she is Russian. Svetlana emphasizes that she is a Serb and she is just learning Russian at school (Batuman, 2017, p. 42). This scene appears as a fragment of all narrative, there is no further conversation on this between Svetlana and Selin. They do not make much of it; however, this particular scene is portrayed in detail. In another scene, Selin and Lakshmi go to a club. Lakshmi is another significant character who is brought up in different countries. When Lakshmi and Selin go into a club, a group of Pakistani boys ask Selin whether she is Pakistani or not. Selin responds that she is not, yet they insistently ask her to confess it and want to know if she is ashamed of being Pakistani. Selin gets rid of them by stating she is Turkish (p. 221). They assume

that Selin is Pakistani because of her physical appearance; similarly, the Russian woman assumes Svetlana is Russian because of her fluent Russian.

Although Selin is aware that prejudices cannot represent a whole nation, she subtly confronts them by not reacting with resentment. It is also addressed that the ignorance about other nations is also common among well-educated circles in American society. It is observable how negative thoughts about *the other* and projection of this negativity to individuals become a part of national identity. In a jazz club, the Hungarian student Gábor insistently asks Selin about her attitude toward the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Even though Selin obviously does not want to talk about it, he expectantly waits for an answer, and finally Selin gives a witty response. She remarks that “It is probably like the Hungarian attitude about being a republic the size of South Carolina.” (p. 300) She does not get angry or fervently defend the Turkish attitude; however, she highlights the fact that the collapse of the Ottoman Empire is not a peculiar example of the fate of empires.

Not being directly harsh, Selin cleverly points out injustices done towards immigrants in America as a daughter of a migrant family. She expresses that her mother plans to produce a film about the experiences of foreign medical students living in the States (p. 11). She adds that it is very difficult for foreign medical school graduates to pass medical exams; therefore, most graduates end up being taxi drivers or they work in drugstores. Even if they succeed, they could be research faculty at second-tier universities. Selin makes it clear that even skilled migrants suffer from the American attitude towards them. In a part in *The Idiot*, Selin says memorization is hated in American schools because educators prefer to foster critical thinking over memorization, as opposed to what is happening in the Soviet Union and Japan. That’s the reason why Japanese and Soviet children are better at doing tests (p. 197). Selin describes how the American educational system portrays students from Eastern countries as lacking in critical thinking skills.

When Selin is in Turkey, this time she observes the image of an American from Turkish people’s perspective. She states that being in Turkey as an American girl with Turkish parents turns out to be even more challenging than explaining her name in America. In *The Idiot*, Selin’s cousin says she is taller than other family members because she grew up eating American food and leads a life of leisure (p. 23). One might argue that not only in America but also in Turkey, Selin observes that people stereotype her for being American. Although she comes to Turkey every summer, she does not feel

that she fits in there either. When she visits her aunt's flat in İstanbul, Batuman uses a metaphor to describe how Selin feels back in Turkey. Describing a sofa, Selin expresses that it is not designed for her, not because her body does not fit it, but because it is for a different personality. She feels alienated in Turkey, sensing that she does not exactly fit the surrounding she is in.

In *Either/Or*, we see preconceptions towards a whole nation in some parts of the novel. The psychologist assigned to Selin says that when she thinks about Turkey, she imagines camels, and she asks whether veiling is required in public. Being the first generation American in the family, Selin calmly explains the importance of secularism for the Turkish national identity. She adds that these questions would actually hurt her mother who is a highly-educated Turkish doctor in America (Batuman, 2022, p. 48). In another example from *Either/Or*, Selin's mother's colleagues ask her whether they wear bathing suits or if she knows Yasser Arafat's wife (p. 159). Both the psychologist and Selin's mother's colleagues are educated individuals, yet they obviously display a prejudiced and ignorant attitude about Turkey.

Selin perpetually encounters a similar attitude, either because people think she is Turkish or because they think she is American. A German girl in Side asks Selin if she can do a belly dance. Selin replies she is from New Jersey causing the girl to move away as soon as she learns it (p. 324). Although she has a Turkish name, she is regarded as a foreigner since she does not fit a certain stereotype of a Turkish woman. At a bus station, Selin wants to help a tourist who is trying to get rid of men who want to carry his luggage to get some money. They disturb the English tourist by insisting and touching him. Selin states that the man does not want any help, yet she gets a hostile response. She expresses that one of the reasons why they behave this way is that she has an accent, as well as having money to come to another country and that she is a girl (p. 326).

In another part, Selin acknowledges that not only individuals but also the discourse of governments are problematic in their approach to other nations. The American government passes acts acknowledging genocides; however, they never name it genocide when it is about Algerians or American Indians (p. 72). She displays both individual attitudes and national attitudes towards the others in different nations that she is in contact with demonstrating how biased and prejudiced they are.

To conclude, the fact that these issues are not the main themes of Batuman's fiction does not mean that they are not a part of the whole narrative or they are

disregarded. Not attaching to the idea of belonging to one nation and defending it blindly, Selin brings together different views pointing out the biased approach of people towards others. However, the main characters are more self-conscious about these issues because each represents a different nation, which obviously brings them a transcending perspective. Leading a life outside the country they were born in enables them to question, and re-evaluate the fixed categories of national identity and belonging.

2.2 Transcending the Notion of Belonging

Either/Or gives readers more about Selin's experiences in Turkey and this time, she mostly spends her time with strangers rather than family members. She realizes that outside attitudes towards her national identity are not similar to what she experiences in the family circle. When she buys an English copy of Rumi's poems, since the Turkish copy mostly includes Persian words, she feels a kind of dissatisfaction from not using her advantage of knowing Turkish:

I felt dissatisfied, as if I was failing to capitalize on some advantage I had from "being" Turkish-one that would compensate for the hassle of having a name and appearance that had always required explanation. It had, I realized, been a real disappointment to get to Turkey and to discover that my name and appearance still required constant explanation- maybe even more so than in America. People heard my accent, and saw what I was wearing, and doing, and it didn't make sense, or fit with my ID card (p. 305).

Regarding children who grow up in a country other than that of their families, Pollock (2009) states that these individuals form a relationship with all cultures; however, they do not necessarily feel attached to any. Pollock adds, owing to this freedom, these individuals belong to nowhere and anywhere at the same time (p. 13,23). The reason that Pollock named the situation of *third kid* as a culture is that these individuals generally feel a sense of bond when they build a relationship with ones who have similar histories and personal experiences. According to Pollock, having a similar background does not mean coming from the same nationalities, he rather refers to people who have similar experiences. From this perspective, the friendship among the characters coming from different countries in both novels is like a companionship of people coming from diverse backgrounds. As transculturalism posits, individual identity is fluid, and a person can be an embodiment of different national/cultural identities. The feeling of alienation, in a sense, frees individuals from being trapped in a single country or culture. Selin defines herself as an American girl and then as Turkish in different parts of the

novel depending on the circumstances (Batuman, 2017 p. 58, 221). However, she transcends both by being in different places and encountering various cultures not only by being physically active but also by reading and learning a lot.

Transcultural identities reshape as a result of encounters with different cultures transforming to be “multifaceted and fluid” as a result of these encounters (Nordin, Edfeldth, Hu, Jonsson and Leblanch et al, 2016, p. 11). Not only do encounters with others shape an individual’s transcultural identity, but advanced communication technologies have been connecting the world; thus, even the most remote places become closer. The places people visit, be it virtual or physical, the books they read, the films they see, or the music they listen to, all become a component of identity construction. Meshing all these in an individual body constitutes what we understand from a transcultural identity.

Like a culturologist, who is also similar to a writer, Selin observes people in and outside cultures aiming to reach the essence of the human condition. She juxtaposes characters and views in her narrative. This is one of the ways of understanding the human condition, which she says is also the objective of writing a novel (Batuman, 2022, p. 188). From this perspective, the objective of writing a novel is not to defend a nation, in other words, her identity as an artist cannot be bounded by a nation. She transcends these concepts by observing and writing about people in their own circumstances. Her identity as an author crosses the limits of borders. Selin’s positioning herself as an artist corresponds to the definition of a contemporary artist who is able to bring together contradicting ideas, double perspectives and complex situations in their narratives (Petersen, 2017, p. 142). A contemporary author is one who can stay outside when s/he is inside. On the other hand, Selin acknowledges that the country or countries one has an organic tie with somehow enriches the author’s writing practice. She states:

I tried to get around the problem by ascribing my thoughts and observations to a fictional character – one with a neutral, universal name, because I didn’t want to seem like I was constantly harping on being Turkish... And yet, the things I was writing about somehow didn’t make sense unless the people were from another country and I didn’t know enough any other countries besides Turkey (Batuman, 2022, p. 83).

While creating universal characters and not implementing one’s nationality is considered a challenge in *The Idiot*, the author image ripens and starts taking shape in

the sequel, *Either/Or*. She becomes more descriptive about what kind of a writer she wants to become and at the end of *Either/Or*, readers see that her identity as an author is not formed merely as a result of being Turkish or American; on the contrary, it transcends both through her reading experience and the people she encounters in real life. In *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*, it is observed that she is highly inspired by Russian literature. It is obvious that her visits to Russia along with her enthusiasm for learning about the Russian language and literature have a great impact on her identity as an author. She keeps taking Russian classes in *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*. Her enthusiasm for learning different languages, the dynamic structure of languages and their relationship with cultures enable her to walk across cultures. At the end of *Either/Or*, she arrives in Russia, a place which holds no direct ties to her ancestry or any place that she has been to because of her family or friend circle. She expresses, “In the past, I had been in one country or another because of other people: my parents, Svetlana, Ivan, Sean. But I was in Russia because I had looked at the literatures of the world and made a choice” (Batuman, 2022, p. 326). She emphasizes that she made a decision, and that decision—to be in Russia—is wholly motivated by her own desire. At this point, she adds, a gap is closing and everything starts becoming coherent completing each other. Russian literature becomes the source of inspiration for her own writing. On a symbolic level, Russia is the place where she strips off all the labels attached to her based on her identity. It is a conscious choice that has been shaping the perception of herself as an author. Russia becomes the transcendent place where she gets the inspiration for constructing her artistic self.

Selin is not the only character who seeks a vision other than the one that is framed by her cultural context, Ivan also follows a similar path. He prioritizes travelling and learning about cultures over other things. Being mobile is a part of his identity. In retrospect, Selin admits that she went to Hungary to understand Ivan better since he cares about being Hungarian, however, she actually discovered that Hungary was just a small part of Ivan (Batuman, 2022, p. 12). It might be interpreted as an indicator that the homeland is not the only determinant of one’s personality if a person, no matter the reason what, locates himself/herself in multiple places adopting a nomadic self. Ivan changes his location in America, travels to Europe and Asia valuing these trips more than being rooted in a particular place.

Svetlana, who is another significant character in Batuman’s novels, is determined about her future goals. Different from Selin, Svetlana cares more about

being in negotiation with her family history and national background. From freshman year on, she is determined about what she aspires to in life. At the beginning of *The Idiot*, when Svetlana and Selin have their first conversation, Svetlana talks about her childhood trauma that occurred in the former Yugoslavia. She says her father was an analyst who was harassed by the opposition party leaders who were once his patients. She narrates a night when soldiers broke into their apartment looking for transcripts that they never found because they had not existed. The soldiers break into their house tearing everything apart (Batuman, 2017, p. 24). The scene indicates that being in a new country or moving away is not an escape from deep traumas regarding one's family and national history.

As Mike Philips (2009) indicates negotiations with national identity and individual histories are significant elements in the never-ending identity construction. Therefore, opening a space for a memory relating to *home* demonstrates that characters are not depicted completely free from their national contexts, rather they are portrayed considering every angle of their personal stories. As Epstein (2009) suggests being transcultural does not mean leaving behind everything about your own national culture or what happened back in your home country, on the contrary, it means developing a new subjectivity without disregarding them. As Batuman portrays it, Svetlana's personality and her aspirations are in parallel with Epstein's views. After Svetlana tells Selin about her childhood trauma, Selin asks her whether she wants to be an analyst. Svetlana responds that she is interested in studying Joseph Brodsky. The reference to Brodsky, who was an exiled poet, holds significance at that point. Before Brodsky arrived in America, he had been sentenced to hard labor because his writings were considered anti-Soviet. He was first sent to Austria and then, he settled in the States, but when he died, he was buried in Italy. Most of his works were translated into various languages and he has been viewed as a representation of those who attempt to pursue a career as an artist under the rule of totalitarian regimes. When they asked Brodsky about his national identity in an interview, he stated "I'm Jewish; a Russian poet, an English essayist- and of course, an American citizen" ("Joseph Brodsky," 2022). He was a transcultural artist who embodied various facets of different identities in one body. Svetlana's willingness to study Brodsky might be interpreted as a demonstration of how she positions herself in the States. Svetlana reevaluates political upheavals in the homeland from a new place and perspective. Being away and studying abroad also mean adopting a new gaze which is provided by outsideness. To sum up, the characters in

Batuman's novels are in the process of constructing their transcultural identity blending their personal histories with the new perspective of being outside, learning and interacting with each other.

2.3 Harvard as a Transcultural Setting

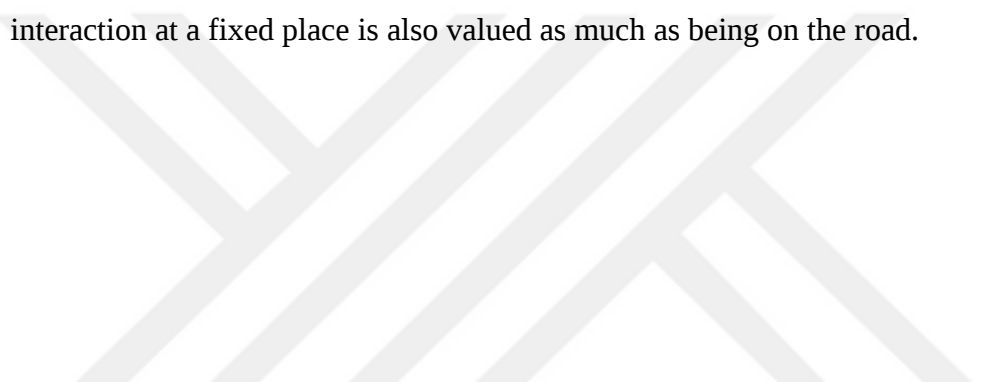
The characters in Elif Batuman's *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* are representatives of various cultural contexts and Harvard serves as the intersection of this rich cultural diversity. The characters come from different cultural backgrounds meeting at a university setting. It is a space where different cultures, world views and identities interact and intermingle through a mutual exchange of ideas. Drawing on Epstein's *transcultural continuum*, Dagnino (2015) elaborates on *transpace/transplace*. As she puts it, *transplace* is an inclusive space of different consciousnesses, cultures and worldviews. She points out that it is also a space allowing "an openness to the reception, integration, negotiation, and permeation of other cultures" (p. 201). In accordance with this view, characters who represent different cultures meet, exchanging their differing views in a university setting.

Although Harvard disappoints Selin when she discovers most students at Harvard hurry about their future plans of getting married and amassing money, she still makes genuine friends like Svetlana and Lakshmi whose views mostly contrast with Selin's, yet enhancing. Selin expresses her passion and what she wants to get from Harvard. She openly states that she expects to meet people who are willing to exchange ideas and live their life on the axis of free movement (Batuman, 2022, p. 208). Being on the move and meeting people who are open to exchanging their ideas contribute to Selin becoming an author. She values openness, interaction and juxtaposing different world views in alignment with the description of transcultural characters. As Helff (2009) points out these characters valorize interaction and meditating among different world views.

As well as hosting students from various nations, Harvard also stands out as an institution, which represents the history of human knowledge. Selin specifically refers to this at the very beginning of *Either/Or*. She describes the course catalog as a magical book that contains all human knowledge. In the catalog, different branches from literature, philosophy to science and anthropology are listed. Svetlana argues that they are historical categories, yet Selin challenges the categorization of departments from a historical perspective suggesting reorganizing them since these categories are not enough to represent the interwoven structure of disciplines. On a symbolic level, Selin

refers to the fact that human knowledge is accumulating and changing its structure over the years; therefore, a new, encompassing perspective is to be brought in to the categorization of departments. Universities, as well as being open places for interconnectedness, are also platforms for improvement and transformation.

All in all, in alignment with Braidotti's notion of nomadic self, individuals do not have to be physically mobile to be transcultural beings. As long as one is open to interaction with others, tries to comprehend the very structure of all cultures and questions different world views, they carry the features of a neo-nomadic self. Harvard, as a setting for interconnectedness, provides this atmosphere for students before they disband for different locations for the summer holiday. While physical mobility is one of the most significant focuses of transcultural novels, willingness for an open interaction at a fixed place is also valued as much as being on the road.



CHAPTER THREE

PHYSICAL AND VIRTUAL MOBILITY

3.1 Exploring the World through Transcultural Lenses in *The Idiot*

One of the main themes in Batuman's fiction is mobility in parallel with one of the features of transcultural novels. Most of the characters have transnational experiences leaving their homelands and exploring new destinations. A distinctive feature of transcultural literature is that the authors and/or characters set their novels in multiple locations. They adopt a nomadic lifestyle and being on the road becomes a part of their transcultural identity. In *The Idiot*, we observe that nearly all characters travel from one place to another. Selin travels to Turkey, France and Hungary. Ivan has been to France, Italy, Japan and Thailand. Peter aims to establish a global network of non-profit schools that would teach English and programming in developing countries. He departs for Mongolia after arriving in Hungary for the program that Selin attends as well (Batuman, 2017, p. 347). Svetlana takes a journey to France, Italy and her home Serbia for the summer.

Being on the move is valorized by each character since it enables new encounters on the road. Selin stresses how important it is for Ivan to travel and experience different cultures. She states where you are from and the countries you visit are very important for Ivan (Batuman, 2017, p. 400). These journeys also activate Batuman's readers to familiarize themselves with different cultures. They provide readers with a perspective on cultures that the characters relate to for some reason. On a metaphorical level, the locations that the characters visit are displayed in continuums, thereby they intermingle while borders disappear. As Helff (2009) states, readers also cross boundaries while characters are changing places in a transcultural novel. The locations that appear in the novels share the quality of acting as points of intersection for people with diverse national, racial, and sexual identities.

It is apparent that museums are on the characters' list of must-visit spots wherever they go in Batuman's novels. Museums, as well as historical sites, are places which tell us about national histories and individual lives. As Juana Du and Mingshi Cui (2021) point out museums are intercultural places and in these places, people with diverse cultural backgrounds share an atmosphere where they can interact and transform. As Du and Mingshi put it, from a transcultural perspective, museums are *third spaces* where cultures meet and collide transforming each other (p. 80). For this reason, the representation of these places is one of the key features of transcultural

literature since these places demystify intercultural relationships. However, transcultural perspective does not disregard the fact that nations mainly construct these museums in order to display their strength. For this reason, one point of view is that contemporary museums must differ from national museums embracing and representing fluid identities (Macdonald, 2015, p. 7). The characters in Batuman's novels bear this *transcultural sensibility* knowing how to interpret the function of these museums. In *The Idiot*, Gary criticizes curators for blaming them for hiding art from the public since they only display a small part of their collections. Then he, ironically referring to their privileged position, adds they should visit Harvard Art Museum to see the artefacts since they have the privilege to do so as the students of Harvard (p. 21-22). They decide to see the Museum of Natural History for the Constructed Worlds class. In the back room of the museum, they are shown a New Zealand diorama. Gary points at broken plaster Native Americans and they see "a bison that had stuffing pouring out of its guts." Gary adds, "You think it is really any different at the Whitney or the Met?... It is all blood and guts in the back room, in one form or another" (p. 26). The symbolism of the wounded bison at the back room of the museum might be interpreted as a symbol of the bloody history of colonialism. This reference is also reminiscent of the discussion related to the necessity of remodeling museums as new cultural spaces, free from being the display of oppressive nations.

Apart from the journeys to the places such as America and Turkey that are linked to the protagonist's cross-cultural identity, the trips to Paris and Hungary have a distinct importance in *The Idiot*. These places enhance Selin's artistic talent and contribute to the development of her transcultural identity. From a transcultural perspective, being in a place rather than your motherland or the country you were born in enables you to transcend yourself in several ways. As Rodriguez (2007) remarks, be it physical or symbolic, mobility enables an individual to go into the process of decentering some qualities that are considered to be inherent such as being bound to a specific territory, race, gender etc (p. 4). Referring to Paul Gilroy, McLeod (2010) points out that the idea of settling down has been replaced by the possibility of exploring new routes. This stance definitely opens up new possibilities, becoming a source of inspiration although it might be a painful experience as well (p. 146). When people explore new territories, they encounter new cultures. All observations in new terrain, as well as comprehending new perspectives, incorporate into personal identity. Drawing upon Epstein, encounters and engagement with art, films, books, and cultures all contribute to identity

construction, which is not fixed or bounded merely to national identity. In this respect, travelling to new places, and learning other languages are common themes in transcultural literature.

While Selin and her friends are flying to Paris, one of the flight attendants asks whether she wants an American or Pakistani meal. Selin prefers a Pakistani meal. On a symbolic level, the scene might be interpreted as she is open and willing to have experiences regarding different cultures. While the plane is hovering in the sky passing countries, Ivan and Selin chat about their itinerary. Ivan tells Selin he will visit Montreux, Budapest, Geneva, Venice, Tokyo and Bangkok. Selin tells Ivan she will go to Turkey after France and Hungary. The plane represents being on the move, crossing borders and having the freedom of going from one place to another. Selin, Svetlana and Ivan embark on the same plane which might be interpreted as a reference to their transnational identities.

While Svetlana and Selin are seeing paintings in the Louvre Museum, Svetlana asks Selin to identify herself with a painting. Upon pondering, she identifies herself with a painting from the Picasso Museum: “Le Buffet de Vauvenargues” but Svetlana objects stating that she should not be identifying herself with an object. However, Selin points out the fluidity of identities referring to Sartre’s ideas on the objectification of self. She says, “Objective claims could be made about a chair, but not about a person, because a person was in constant flux. I said the buffet was also in flux. I said its existence preceded its essence” (Batuman, 2017, p. 246). Bearing in mind Sartre’s concept of bad faith, it might be concluded that one acts according to past experiences; however, the present and future always stand in front of us as new possibilities transcending existent reality. The reality of the present and the open possibilities of the future are the components in the process of building a self. Thus, one might argue that personal identity is not stable; instead, it is flexible destroying and remaking itself through experiences. The confrontation with the other involves some barriers, be it cultural or personal, however, there is always a possibility of future contact as well as transformation with the experience.

Wherever Selin goes, she spins a web connecting cultures around the world feeding her narrative with sub-stories that perfectly contrast as well as match with the setting she is in. She destroys the border between the east and the west blending these two into one another. The physical reality of a place is blurred with the inclusion of other sub-stories which contrast the setting. When Selin is in Svetlana’s aunt’s

apartment in Paris, she grabs a chess book that she has borrowed from Bill. Flipping through the pages, she learns about a chess-playing automaton that is known as “the Turk” which was created by a Hungarian named Baron Wolfgang von Kempelen in 1760. We learn that the Turk remarks “Êchec” (check) before it makes its move, just like the word “Eşek” (donkey) in Turkish. Selin mentions that the mystery of the Turk is exposed by Edgar Allan Poe in *Southern Literary Messenger* (Batuman, 2017, p. 248). What makes this automaton a striking part of the narrative is that it travels from one continent to another making it famous all around the world; the Turk toured around Europe and North America and even played against historical figures Napoleon Bonaparte and Benjamin Franklin. Following the years in America, the automaton ended up in a Chinese Museum and was destroyed in a fire there (Josić, 2022). Svetlana compares the intriguing story of the Turk to Selin, who she thinks, is like the automaton in her relationship with Ivan wafting from one place to another. Even if the characters in Batuman’s novels are in a particular place, they are never stable on a symbolic level. The physical reality of a place and the abstract nature of the constant references to other places collide and dissolve in each other; thus, one can infer that Batuman’s novels present scenes from the world that are compiled in a fusion. After visiting the Picasso Museum, the characters attend a Turkish film festival in Paris. References to artworks in different locations point out the transcendent position of art that is beyond borders and nations.

The chapter that Selin visits Hungary for a program that aims at teaching English to children in a small village also bears significance. Despite peculiar cultural differences between the two societies, Hungarian and Turkish histories intersect in several ways because of the long-lasting Ottoman hegemony in Hungary. On her journey to Hungary, Selin is not portrayed as a tourist who merely goes to a country to enjoy good food and culture. As a transcultural character, her approach to the countries she visits involves learning the language of the country and understanding the people living there. She positions herself from a distance and tries to understand, as much as she can, the essence of human life in different places. On the airplane to Budapest from Paris, she reads *Teach Yourself Hungarian*. She shows a special interest in languages which are the gateways to cultures. Therefore, one might suggest that the fact that Selin attempts to learn the language and culture of the countries she visits differs her experience from tourist experience.

On the other hand, as a perfect metaphor of connection and fluidity, the river Danube is referred to a few times in the Hungarian section of *The Idiot*. Flowing through ten countries such as Serbia, Slovakia, Germany, Austria, and Bulgaria, it is possible to state that the Danube is at the heart of Europe being one of the oldest trade routes. Thus, sailing down the Danube is like sailing through time and history. The river witnessed big catastrophes and turning points as well as different cultures built on its bank. While canoeing with Ivan, Selin addresses the significance of the river. She says, “For a moment it felt like we weren’t in the Danube at all but in the river of time, and everyone was at a different point, though in another sense we were all here at once” (Batuman, 2017, p. 376). Canoeing together, Selin and Ivan pass under bridges. A bridge is a symbol of connection and crossing. The river, on the other hand, symbolizes fluidity through which everything intermingles. The scene might be interpreted as a metaphor for the whole history that all cultures are involved in one way or another. As a young writer, Selin is like an observer who travels through time and place.

While they are waiting for Peter on the bank of the Danube, Cheryl asks how to say bear in Hungarian and learns it is Medve, which is similar to Russian медведь. Andrea indicates that Hungary was once Shamanistic and bears were sacred animals; however, the word later became taboo resulting in it being replaced by a Slavic word (Batuman, 2017, p. 304). As Jenő Fazekas (1967) indicates in his article, Shamanistic elements in Hungarian folklore came from the East and became a tradition via migrant Hungarians. Hungarian Shamanistic tradition should be considered related to the practices that originated in the Eastern lands, especially Siberia. Also, contact with invaders in Central Asia and South-East Europe is considered to be one of the factors of the emergence of Shamanism in Hungary. Later, Christianity pervaded the country mostly modifying and overlaying these traditions (p. 98). It is also known that most Turkic peoples had a long history with Shamanism. The reference to Shamanism is an indication of the cultural background of the country, which involves interaction and modification through these encounters. For this reason, these references are significant from a transcultural perspective because each of them enriches the transcultural structure of the novel.

On the day they go sightseeing in Budapest, Selin is introduced to buildings that date back to the Ottoman hegemony in Hungary. While they are wandering around the city, they learn the stories behind the magnificent historical structures. Also, the characters learn how the stories of these buildings are one way or another interconnected

with various cultures. For instance, Selin and her friends from the program visit the Carmelite Monastery of Buda. She is informed that the building was once a mosque during the Ottoman occupation. Following that period, it became a church and finally upon renovation by Wolfgang von Kempelen, who is introduced to the reader as the inventor of chess-playing automaton Turk, it was converted into a theatre. Although these connections are built upon invasion, it is impossible not to mention that the process, be it through invasion or artistic production, is a result of an accumulation of components from different cultures. The story of a place that belongs to one culture is ultimately connected to another culture. On the same page, the story of Margaret Island is narrated. The island is also called Rabbit Island either because Turks built a harem in it or Hungarian kings sent rabbits there to hunt them. The Ottoman Sultans engage in sexual intercourse with multiple women in the harem. In English and Turkish, there is a saying which means having sexual intercourse like rabbits do. The story that is associated with the harem and rabbits might be interpreted as a reference to an orientalist view.

We also learn that Béla IV promised to give his daughter to God if the Tatars were defeated. After it had happened, he built a convent and sent his daughter there where she became a nun (Batuman, 2017, p. 296). The narrative of King Béla's offering his daughter to God alludes to the history of filicide from the sacrifice of Isaac to Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia. The narrative of sacrificing or raising children for serving God is done in order to appease in various cultures.

In one part of *The Idiot*, Selin describes a café which is said to be often visited by Romani people living in Hungary. The arrival of Roma to the Balkan countries dates back to the mid-fourteenth century. They are considered to have migrated from Wallachia to Transylvania and Hungary. In a documentary about the daily life of the Romani people in Hungary, it is pointed out that the Romani people are the last nomadic tribes across Europe (Tracks, 2018). The existence of various cultures in a country illustrates that culture is indeed a sum of sub-cultures, which form a whole country. For this reason, the references to Shamans, Roma and the Ottoman impact on the Hungarian way of life demonstrate that cultures are not monolithic structures, rather they emerge out of the interaction of various groups throughout the phases of history. Although all of the aforementioned groups have distinct cultural identities, the interaction among them results in the formation of a new culture. Hence, the references here are significant for readers to see intricate components that form a national identity.

Although the part that Selin visits Turkey is only limited to the last few pages in *The Idiot*, the time spent in Turkey still gives the readers a picture of how Selin positions herself in the motherland. As it was mentioned, the places visited are relevant to the identity construction of transcultural individuals. Thus, the qualities of the place that is visited have an impact on the visitor. This impact becomes a part of transcultural identity. Selin's road always crosses with transcultural identities be it with Ivan or ordinary people she meets on the road. At the airport on her way to Istanbul, she meets a woman whose husband works on a ship that circles between Denmark and China. The ship is going to dock for a few days in Istanbul, which is why the woman is flying there. Being in Istanbul itself is a transcultural experience not only because of Selin's cross-cultural identity but also because Istanbul is a multicultural city.

Istanbul has been the meeting point for people from different cultures as well as an attraction for traders from all around the world. In their article, Maria D. Alvarez and Şükrü Yarcın (2010) discuss that Istanbul is transforming into a world city with the impact of cultural activities. As they suggest, a *world city*, which describes cities characterized by advancement in their services, contacts with a global network and it is a center of creativity (p. 266). They define Istanbul as the intersection where cultures and religions meet (p. 268). The multicultural structure of Istanbul attracts many people from around the world creating a fusion of cultures, which constitutes the culture of Istanbul. In this respect, Istanbul invites its visitors to a transcultural experience.

Although Selin expresses that she spent most of her time in Ankara, the capital of secular Turkey, she adds that she still wants to see Istanbul because Ivan describes Istanbul to be a mesmerizing and multilayered city. Rather than being a part of it, Selin distances herself from the city wandering like an observer there. When she lands in Istanbul, she defines Turkish to be smooth and clear to her ears compared to Hungarian. Her narrative in this part mostly is about her personal experience in the house of her aunt Belgin and cousin Defne who are her only relatives in Istanbul. The references to the multicultural structure of the city leave their place to a reality that Selin positions herself as a stranger there. She states, the sofa bed in the house of Belgin was obviously designed for someone else, for a different person (p. 414). Selin indicates she does not belong there; however, she is still charmed by the idea that experiencing a multicultural city like Istanbul would be an interesting part of her journey in the way of understanding people. She observes carefully what is around her and how the culture is developed with the influence of people staying in a particular place. In Istanbul, she tastes the traditional

food Dolma, visits Topkapı Palace, eats Belgian waffles in a shopping mall and buys a notebook from a Japanese stationary store. Although the Istanbul leg of her journey was short, still, picturing a multicultural city like Istanbul is a strong image from a transcultural perspective.

3.2 Being on the Road in *Either/Or*

Either/Or offers more about Turkey for comprehending the transcultural essence of the country as well as Batuman's fiction in relevance to this perspective. While the first part of *Either/Or* mainly takes place at Harvard, the fourth part of the novel revolves around Selin's trip to Turkey for her summer employment. The summer job involves writing about the locations she visits for the Let's Go travel guide series which is written by Harvard University students. Her original itinerary is Central Anatolia, the Mediterranean coast, and North Cyprus, rather than the popular tourist attractions like Istanbul or the southern Aegean coast of Turkey. On a symbolic level, Selin's transcultural identity along with her personal experiences coincide with the multicultural history of Turkey. In *Either/Or*, the countries like Japan, Ukraine, Hungary and Turkey are stated to be the countries which are split between the East and the West (Batuman, 2022, p. 141). Anatolia, which is considered to be the cradle of the most prominent civilizations, holds a special position in this respect. Selin addresses the Hittite Museum at the beginning of her journeys in Turkey, which is also a reference to the multicultural structure of Anatolia. When Selin arrives in Ankara, one of the first stops is the Hittite Museum. In the Hittite Museum, visitors can see the artifacts from the civilizations that were a part of Anatolia since the Paleolithic Age. It is also known that the Hittites became a powerful kingdom in Anatolia encompassing people disregarding the differences of ethnicity and language, which is considered to be a significant factor in their success.

In the Ankara leg of her travel, Selin and her mother visit Paşabahçe glassware shop, and state that they admire the *Çeşm-i Bülbül* which are exquisitely crafted glasses for rakı and other beverages (Batuman, 2022, p. 286). As Artut and Hasoğlu (2018) explain, the *Çeşm-i Bülbül* has a particular place in the history of glass production in the Ottoman Empire. Mehmet Dede, who was a craftsman who lived during the reign of Sultan Selim III, was sent to Venice to learn the practice of *reticello* glass. The glass started to be produced in Istanbul combining this particular style with special craftsmanship. These designs are verified to be a part of the cultural heritage and are found in markets all around the world. The *Çeşm-i Bülbül*, which is still manufactured

in the Republic of Turkey and exported to other countries, has become a part of Turkish cultural heritage. Artut and Hasoğlu (2018) also add that the Venetian technique that was adopted for making the *Çeşm-i Bülbül* was imitated in Venice as *verre turk*, which means Turkish glass (p. 416-8). Bearing in mind the transcultural approach to art which emphasizes that the worthiest cultural productions result from cultural engagements, the portrayal of a traditional glass-ware shop in Ankara reveals the cultural richness and diversity in the history of the Turkish Republic.

Selin is also aware of the fact that cultural richness and the quality standard of a place are beyond the appreciation of the Western world. She finds out that the Hittite Museum was awarded as European Museum of the Year in 1997 and adds that its real worth is beyond what the Europeans or the Americans value (Batuman, 2022, p. 269). The Eurocentric perspective on the value of cultural products is deconstructed by postmodern understanding. While postmodernism is destroying the distinction between low and high art set by Eurocentric thinking, it is observed that cultures as well as cultural products are not merely a result of one-sided flow, rather they are a result of constant interaction that persists from the earlier phases of history. Including these cultural elements in her novels, Batuman not only tells a story of a young heroine who is trying to find her path as an author but also reveals multilayered structures of the cultures she observes.

In one passage, Selin mentions an Early Bronze Age figurine from Hasanoğlu that has been displayed in the Anatolian Civilizations Museum. The ankles of the figurine are ringed by a gold band, and its face is hammered in gold. The finding is considered to be unique; however, its original context is debatable. It is considered to have a relation to the six other royal burials in Alaca Höyük (Özen and Zimmermann, 2016, p. 21). Bearing in mind the mother goddess figurines found in excavations in Anatolia, the reference to the Hasanoğlu figurine alludes to a period when femininity was celebrated and held a sacred position in these lands. Selin remarks, “She was beautiful-lithe, doll-like, eminently portable. You wanted to move her through the world. In that sense, she seemed exciting and free” (Batuman, 2022, p.295). This reference to the female goddess celebrates the strength of women that comes from our female ancestors. As it is also interpreted in the novel, women represent freedom, being here and there, not being bound to any restrictive categories of identity. On a metaphorical level, one can argue that the goddess with the dejected face alludes to all the suffering women in history have gone through. The way women are depicted in

ancient times is linked to the women empowerment process today as well as Selin's empowerment as an aspiring author. She is here and there and cannot be confined within the limits of a nation's borders. The figurine serves as a mirror which reflects the power she holds wherever she goes, the power that is inherited by her female ancestors.

Another stop in Turkey is to the heart of Central Anatolia, Cappadocia. Widely known for its natural beauties and fairy chimneys, the region hosted different civilizations throughout history and is still one of the most outstanding tourist attractions in Turkey. As Ferika Özer Sarı and Malike Özsoy (2010) indicate, the region has been inhabited from the pre-Christian era to today. It was home to the Hittite Empire, the Persian Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Ottoman Empire and the Turkish Republic; therefore, the synthesis of the traces of pre-Christian, Christian and Islam eras are observed in the region. The hotels in the area offer an atmosphere to their visitors in which they can enjoy items that are crafted with traditional Turkish motifs as well as Byzantine architecture. Selin stays at one of these places, which is a 150-year-old Greek Ottoman hotel. The region is a symbol of a cultural mosaic that has lasted from ancient times to the present day.

The next city Selin stops by is Konya, which is not Rumi's birthplace but his final resting place. The reference to Rumi, known as Mevlana in Turkish, is one of the strongest aspects of the novel from transcultural and intertextual lenses. Being a great poet and Islamic scholar who is associated with Sufism, Rumi was one of the most influential artists. His views are highly appreciated by many people whether they are Muslims or not. Therefore, there has been an ongoing debate to claim Rumi as a part of their national identity by countries such as Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan. However, Rumi's approach to national identity seems much less significant for him considering his commitment to search for divine love. It transcends all other earthly labels that are related to one's national identity or other earthly possessions. In his article, "Mevlana and the Illusions of Nationalism" Talât Saîd Halman (2015) argues that it is not reasonable to label Mevlana to a particular national identity not only because of his transcendent understanding of the world, but also because he was an immigrant and was able to speak more than one language. He quotes from Rumi's own lines: "The nation of love differs from all others/ Lovers bear allegiance to no nation or sect" (p. 123). These lines clearly indicate that he values pure love above all worldly labels related to one's identity.

Also, Halman remarks neither Balkh, the city he was born, nor Turkey was defined by one specific culture. These lands always hosted different communities as well as cultures. He indicates that most Turkish historians consider Rumi to be Turkish since he lived in Turkey for most of his life and he is a descendant of a Turkish family. As Halman points out, one of the most influential effects on Rumi's artistic style is the Persian culture and language through which he expressed most of his poetry (p. 125). As Halman elaborates, "Rumi's broad knowledge embraces many cultures other than Persian and Islamic -certainly Greek, Hebraic, Indian, and Turkish" (p. 126). He adds that more studies should be done in order to reveal his art which contains a synthesis of multiple cultures. The difficulty of defining Rumi as a part of a single culture, tradition and religion makes it possible to describe him as a transcultural individual. For this reason, the part through which Rumi's life and some of his couplets are shared is significant considering the transcultural structure of the novel.

After briefly defining Rumi as a founder of the Mevlevi order, Selin states, "I never had into transcendental states that defied the limits of language, or anything else that defied the limits of language" (Batuman, 2022, p.330). The pilgrim image of the artist who transcends all the stable categories of identity even defying the limits of language inspires Selin on her way to be an artist. She expresses that she is impressed by the unconventional life story of Rumi since he first started as a conventional, religious man and turned out to be a mad man who indulged in poetry and love. The image of Rumi as an artist whose views transcend the stable categories of identity and Selin's quest to be an artist intersect in Konya a thousand miles away from the country Selin was born. The places Selin visits and the emphasis on the features of these places as well as the people she meets on the road are in accordance with the transcultural approach which suggests that being on the road and growing on the way are significant themes in transcultural novels.

3.3 The Significance of Virtual Space

Not only physical places but also virtual space is as significant as physical places in Batuman's novel *The Idiot* since it presents a fusion of physical and virtual in terms of their significance in interpersonal communication. One of the markers of transnational/transcultural discourse is that it is significantly shaped by the virtual world, namely the internet age. As Welsch (2001) puts forward, culture cannot be defined as a closed structure anymore, especially because media is at the heart of our globalized world. Drawing upon Hannah Arendt, Christina Schachtner (2015) suggests

that this active participation process in the online sphere results in a new identity formation as well (p. 232). According to Schachtner, the internet creates transcultural cyberspace in which people from different parts of the world exchange ideas. She likens networks to interwoven threads that are accessible to people all around the world (p. 229). Through interaction, individuals contact different cultures, which were not reachable for most people in the past due to economic and political reasons. Thanks to the internet, people are able to learn and adopt some qualities from various cultural practices or create an understanding of new perspectives other than the ones that are imposed by their home culture. In one second, it is possible to visit the Egyptian Pyramids or explore the Amazon rainforest. It is possible to observe that the boundaries between physical and virtual places are blurred from the very beginning of *The Idiot*.

The first page of *The Idiot* foreshadows the transcultural nature of the novel. Readers travel with the characters who move physically or virtually from one place to another. On the first page, Selin expresses she does not know what email is before she starts college. However, from that point on, emailing becomes one of the ways of self-expression for the protagonist throughout the novel. In Batuman's fiction, epistolary form transforms into email form. Emails become a wire that connects her ideas to the person who is physically away. Even when Ivan and Selin have lost contact in *Either/Or*, Selin keeps on writing emails to reflect her ideas and feelings on a screen.

Selin recalls her father remarking that the time has been changing so fast. At the very beginning of *The Idiot* Selin's father points out the power of the internet in terms of connecting the world just in seconds. He states that he was in the Metropolitan Museum of art and then, he found himself in Anıtkabir, Ankara in seconds (Batuman, 2017, p. 3). Then, Selin explains that the founder of the Turkish Republic, Atatürk's mausoleum is located in Anıtkabir. The reference to Anıtkabir and the Metropolitan Museum of Art might be interpreted as a symbolic bridge that connects the East and the West. The collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art includes a wide range of artworks from Islamic, Asian art, and European paintings to works from Africa and the Americas (Metmuseumofart, 2022). The collection includes pieces from ancient cultures as well as contemporary art works. On the following page, Selin defines the internet as "another world" and emails from different people resemble "universal writing" (Batuman, 2017, p. 4). The way she describes emails is similar to the definition of transculturalism. She remarks:

And each message contained the one that had come before, so your own words came back to you-all the words you threw out, they came back. It was like the story of your relations with others, the story of the intersection of your life with other lives, was constantly being recorded and updated, and you could check it at any time (Batuman, 2017, p. 4).

In the way our lives collide and intermingle with the messages of others, the notion of fixity of personal identity is replaced by constant interaction and transformation. In a highly mediatized world, life experiences and identities start taking a shape as a result of these close encounters. Bearing in mind the analogy between electronic messages and real communication, one might conclude that these encounters with others become a path for us in the way of shaping our worldview. The internet, in other words, virtual space, functions as a transcultural space that facilitates these encounters.

CHAPTER FOUR

LINGUISTIC AND INTERTEXTUAL COMPONENTS

4.1 Polyphonic Nature of the Works

As Fiona Doloughan (2021) indicates, transcultural authors do not only shift or translate between languages, they also move across different genres, styles and cultures expanding the horizon of readers. On the other hand, Rita Wilson (2011) remarks that translingual writers are navigators between languages and their social contexts. These authors are mediators of the encounters of different cultures fostering the process of transformation as a result of these encounters (p.235). Transcultural authors, who are bilingual and sometimes multilingual, are capable of writing in two languages or more. Their talent to be able to shift among languages makes them knowledgeable of linguistic and cultural patterns among the languages they know.

The transcultural approach regarding the existence of multiple languages and styles in a text is also in accordance with the Bakhtinian understanding of a polyphonic novel. As aforementioned, Bakhtin (1986) considers texts as organic structures which include various languages, speech acts and generic qualities. As Bakhtin (1986) suggests, novels are strongly linked with cultural contexts; however, he sees cultures as open unities which interact with other cultures as well. As Bakhtin (1984) emphasizes, a polyphonic novel includes a plurality of voices each representing their own unique qualities. Since Elif Batuman expertly inserts other languages, primarily Turkish, in her texts, her fiction contains elements that are significant from transcultural and Bakhtinian perspectives. Apart from fitting words and phrases from other languages, she translates her experiences in Turkey into English. She fits the Turkish language in English, as well as other languages she is in contact with in certain parts of her novels. The structure of languages, meaning and the relationship among them are at the heart of *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* because they are the tools authors use to reflect the human experience that she is after.

Not only the protagonist Selin, but also most of the other characters are multilingual; therefore, the novels include comparisons revealing similarities and differences as well as the etymology of some words. On the first page of *The Idiot*, the narrator Selin refers to the silent ğ in her last name Karadağ. Since Batuman's last name does not have any specifically Turkish letters, one interpretation might be that Batuman chose the surname Karadağ in order to indicate the cultural difference. The emphasis on her Turkish name foreshadows that the novel involves references related to the

Turkish language and cultural identity. On the other hand, Karadağ is the Turkish name of Montenegro, which connects Selin to Svetlana and other Eastern European characters. In several parts of the novels, especially during her conversations with her mother and through her experiences in Turkey, Selin translates from English to Turkish. As Dagnino (2015) puts it, transcultural authors and the characters in their texts are constantly in the process of translation. She reckons that these authors/characters translate customs, worldviews as well as idioms. In doing so, they explore new perspectives and cultural traditions that are reflected through languages. (p. 95) Thus, they incorporate various cultural elements into a single body of the text they have been writing in a transcultural way.

In *The Idiot*, readers are familiarized with some Turkish idioms going between Turkish and English with the help of the translations provided by Selin. To illustrate, she translates the phrase “İyi aile çocuğu” from Turkish to English as “family boy” (p. 52). In Turkish, the phrase is used to describe boys who are well-behaved and reliable. The phrase is also commonly used to describe young adults who are thought to be suitable for marriage. At another time, Ivan emails Selin with the subject line in Turkish. Ivan reads an English-Turkish dictionary and makes up the phrase “Domuzuna çalışmak” in the meaning of studying too much. Selin explains pig is not an animal that is associated with working hard and is not valued by Turkish culture. Instead, Turkish people use donkeys to describe people working hard (p. 105). The idiom used for describing people working hard is “Eşek gibi çalışmak.” Learning some Turkish words, Ivan makes up a new idiom which is actually close to the idiom “Eşek gibi çalışmak” in Turkish.

It is possible to observe similar patterns in *Either/Or* as well. She translates “Kendini yerden yere attı” or “başını taştan taşa vurdu.” to English as “Prostrated by suffering” or she “beat her head from one stone to another stone” (Batuman, 2022, p. 75). In Turkish, the phrase is used to express suffering or the regret one feels upon hearing some bad news. Turkish expressions generally appear in the family circle, mostly through conversations between Selin and her mother. While strolling in a Picasso exhibit, her mother expresses her dislike of a painting adding, “He did his best... he did what came from his hand” (p. 156). Selin states that her mother expressed this in Turkish, adding that the phrase in Turkish is like “a world-weary witticism” (p.159). In Turkish, it is “Elinden gelenin en iyisini yapmak.” It is used to describe people who do their best no matter what the result is. Although it is not easy to trace the

origin of them, proverbs and idioms are products of observation and experience processes that last thousands of years. As it is known, some of them exist in various cultures, and some of them are unique to a specific area.

Selin states that she would try to learn proverbs if they belonged to a foreign country, like Russia. Similarly, she decides to learn the ones she hears in Turkey. She explains the meaning of these phrases to readers like a mediator among the cultures. She starts writing down two proverbs she is already familiar with. One of them is “The fakir chicken lays eggs one at a time,” and the other is “The egg didn’t like its shell” (p. 292). She briefly explains the meaning of them, too. At the same time, these translations add humor to the narrative structure of Batuman’s novels.

Although Batuman’s novels are written in English, she defies the limits of English inserting other languages in her texts. The variety of languages belonging to different national identities also fosters the polyphonic nature of her texts. Since the narrator is bilingual from a very early age, she is well-aware of the fact that the language one speaks is related to the culture that one is a part of and impacts the way one thinks. For this reason, she emphasizes people think differently in different languages (Batuman, 2017, p.45). At this point, she reveals how the Turkish suffix *-miş*, which has no equivalent in English, functions. She narrates some of her memories that are about this suffix and how her experience is affected by it. *-miş* is used like Past Tense, yet it distances the speaker from the event that happened as if the person hears it from someone else. Demonstrating the function of the Turkish suffix *-miş* and its influence on her personal experience, Selin illustrates that the languages one learns also help this person to comprehend the way people think in this particular language. Although there are common lexical and grammatical components of languages, each language displays distinct features that are peculiar to the culture it evolves from.

Despite the distinct qualities of languages, which are a result of cultural processes, there are also similarities in grammatical structure, especially among the languages under the same language families. On the other hand, due to the existence of cognates and loanwords, many different languages share a large number of words. Sharing these linguistic patterns is also significant on a symbolic level since languages are not represented as closed systems in Batuman’s novels. Instead, they are explained to be evolving systems as a result of constant intercultural communication.

When Selin and Svetlana are in a shop selling mostly Russian brands, some Turkish brands also catch their eyes. Svetlana states that she knows them not only

because they have these brands in Belgrade, but also because there are some common words in Serbo-Croatian and Turkish such as eggplant, bean, chickpea and sour cherry (Batuman, 2017, p. 41). Lidija Ban and Darko Matovac (2012) elaborate, the contact with Turks beginning from the 15th century on, with the conquest of Hungary by the Ottomans, left an impact on the local population in this area. It is still possible to trace these influences on the Serbo-Croatian language, not on a grammatical but on a lexical level. In Ban's and Matovac's article, it is also emphasized that not all these words that were taken from Turkish have a Turkish origin. Some of them are derived from Arabic and Persian. These words are called *orijentalizmi* and lots of these words are adopted "through Turkish as an intermediate language" (p. 158-9). Svetlana exemplifies some of these words that are the same in Serbo-Croatian and Turkish: Patlıcan- patlidžan, fasülye-pasulj, leblebi-leblebije. These words are placed in a novel narrated in English enabling readers to spot some similarities between Serbo-Croatian and Turkish.

There are also similarities highlighted between Hungarian and Turkish such as the words beard and handcuffs (p. 105). Beard, in Turkish *sakal*, is *szakáll* in Hungarian. In another conversation, Ivan and Selin discover that words like goat, apple and boot are similar in Turkish and Hungarian. The Hungarian words, kecske, alma and csizma are keçi, elma and çizme in Turkish (p. 212). Before she goes to Hungary to teach English in a Hungarian village, Selin starts to learn Hungarian through a book called *Teach Yourself Hungarian*. She expresses that she is struck by the similarities between Turkish and Hungarian not at the lexical level, but at the grammatical level since both languages are agglutinative. She adds, "Both had vowel harmony, and neither had grammatical gender. Both used a single word for 'he' and 'she': ő in Hungarian, o in Turkish" (p. 254). In some other cases, Selin masterfully creates her own synthesis by interweaving languages, using humor as an element of the narrative. In *The Idiot*, Selin elaborates on how Hungarians reject similarities between the Hungarian and the Turkish, apart from some common Turkish loanwords such as *kırbaç* and *korbács*. "Turkish word for handcuffs (kelepçe) was actually the Hungarian word for trap, whereas the Hungarian word for handcuffs (bilincs) was the Turkish word for consciousness" (p. 347). Selin makes a pun with false Hungarian and Turkish homonyms creating her own synthesis of languages in a humorous way.

Apart from the inclusion of linguistic components of languages in her novels, Batuman also points out the existence of global, old and new language systems such as the usage of Creole, Pidgin and so to speak, the newly-evolving digital language.

Through an adult education program, Selin tries to teach English to a Dominican student. Although she knows Spanish, she avoids speaking it. While he is learning English, one of the characters Joaquin has difficulty resulting in interference with his native language. Selin interprets Joaquin's approach to language as pidgin. Pidgin is a language shared by specific groups, none of whom are native speakers, and it is mostly used among Europeans and non-Europeans, especially for the purpose of trade and business. Since they do not have a grammar structure such as inflection of verbs, they are classified as broken languages (Mufwene & Sangol, 2017). On the other hand, Creoles, which involve morphology and syntax, are defined to be expanded and a more complex form of Pidgins (Özorçun, 2015). Another language that exists in *The Idiot* is Esperanto. As Paul Carus (1906) defines, it is an auxiliary international language. It is a constructed language with a structure derived from Indo-European languages. Carus indicates that the grammar of Esperanto is mainly built on Latin grammar and the components of the language are predominantly from Romance languages with some German and English elements. Esperanto is the most commonly spoken constructed language. Although it is mostly spoken in Europe, it is also spoken in South America and some parts of Asia. Esperanto appears in two parts in *The Idiot*. In one of them, Rózsa, Piri and Selin talk about an Esperanto phrase book including two words from Hungarian, *papriko* and *gulašo*. Selin adds that the book is translated into several languages reading some frequently used words. In the other, Piri shouts in Esperanto “*Malsano... Malsano, blechhh!*” (p.354). Malsano means disease and Piri, who is fluent in Esperanto, uses it as a medium of communication while she is talking to Selin. The representation of Esperanto indicates the existence of languages other than national languages adding another layer to the transcultural narrative structure in the novel. Readers walk across these languages like Selin does and witness that they are blended into a novel in English.

In *Either/Or*, there are also indications about the interweaving nature of languages. Selin and her Finnish friend Juho interrogate the similarities among languages such as Finnish, Turkish, Hungarian, Korean and Japanese. When Selin mentions the common characteristics of Hungarian and Turkish languages, Juho expresses he has also spotted similarities between Japanese and Finnish while he has been studying Japanese (Batuman, 2022, p. 61). Although the relatedness of the languages in the Ural-Altaic language family is questionable, there are three branches of this family including Uralic, Korea-Japanese and Altaic as well as sub-branches.

While the Altaic branch includes Turkic, Mongolic, and Tungusic languages, Uralic languages include Hungarian, Estonian and Finnish. The relatedness of these languages is not because of similar inherited words, but rather because of linguistic features such as word order, vowel harmony and agglutination. These aspects of the languages belonging to the Ural-Altaic language family have become a component of the whole narrative about languages.

Not only does Batuman spare a place for languages we know in a classic sense, but she also points out the existence of digital/programming language, which is relatively new, but an alternative way of communication. In one of Ivan's emails, he writes about the configurations of the text editor Emacs. He closes the email by saying that spoken languages are so simplified and exposed (Batuman, 2017, p. 121). One might argue that the possibility of people finding alternative languages also opens the possibility of getting out the existing preconditions languages assert. It means the possibility of finding an escape from all existing categories imposed on individuals by languages. New language systems like coding, which is a mathematical language, create a transcendental space that completely vanishes the impact of impositions that are intrinsic in languages. For this reason, pointing out alternative systems is significant from a transcultural perspective. Similarly, Selin tells what Ivan thinks about Math. Ivan likes the fact that there is no boundary between what you write and think in Math. The relationship between the two is direct and it does not change (p. 132). Since Math is a system that helps us comprehend the surrounding reality around us by using numbers, formulas, symbols and shapes, it is considered to be a universal language system. The symbols that are used in Math are the same all around the world. Including several languages as well as alternative language systems in her novel, Batuman both demonstrates the polyphonic nature of her novels and reveals cultural exchanges that are hidden in the structure of languages.

4.2 Generic Features

Genette (1997) claims that analyzing the generic qualities of texts is a prerequisite in order to see intertextual relationships between two or more texts and he defines these generic qualities under the title of *architextuality* (p. 4). On the other hand, Bakhtin (1986) puts genres at the center of all languages distinguishing primary and secondary genres. While the former involves daily communicative activities, the latter refers to literary works. He adds that genres evolve as a form of dialogue and addresses the necessity of studying genres to comprehend intertextual relationships (Bakhtin,

1986 as cited in Stockwell and Whitley, 2014, p. 105). Therefore, genre analysis holds a significant position in comprehending a text from an intertextual approach.

In order to comprehend how Batuman approaches genres while she is creating her works, it is significant to understand the generic qualities of her first book *The Possessed: Adventures with Russian Books and the People Who Read Them*. The way she describes the process of fiction writing in *The Possessed* sheds light on the structure of *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*. In *The Possessed*, which is a kind of combination autobiography and literary criticism that is enriched with fictional elements, Batuman takes the readers to several journeys with literary figures. On the way to discovering canonical authors, she struggles to find her own path as a young writer. In an innovative way, Batuman's works destroy the distinction between fiction and non-fiction blurring the line between the two in her narrative. While this quality of her fiction is a significant component of transcultural literature, generic qualities are indicators of intertextuality in Batuman's works.

While *The Possessed* is generally regarded as a memoir, *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* are published as novels carrying more dominantly fictional features. Batuman's novels are regarded to be close to autobiographical fiction/autofiction. In a classic sense of the term, autobiography is a biography through which an author accounts his/her personal life. Fiction, on the other hand, is defined as "any literary narrative which is feigned or invented and does not purport to be historical truth" (Abrams, 1988, p. 62). Batuman's novels consist of elements of both autobiography and fiction.

As Ralph Clare (2020) points out, autofiction has been gaining popularity in American narrative with the contribution of authors who represent this genre such as Maggie Nelson and Sheila Heti. As he puts it, autofiction blends fiction, non-fiction and autobiography in a single text. On the other hand, autotheory, through which an author blends philosophy and personal experience, is classified as a subcategory of autofiction. Referring to Huehls, Clare states that these authors are also creative readers (p. 87). As Clare indicates, contrary to the first wave of French poststructuralism which prioritizes the "death of subject", the subsequent waves such as queer, feminist, and race studies embrace the "specificity of personal experience" (p.89). Batuman is also one of the innovative authors who mesh these generic qualities in the body of her novels. In some parts of her novels, Selin interrogates philosophical concepts, analyzes literary characters, and investigates the nature of languages combining all of these different styles in the body of her works.

Batuman states in one of her interviews that she has planned to combine essays and fiction in *Either/Or*, yet the final version evolved to be a work of fiction (Books are Magic, 2022). In an interview with Merve Emre, Batuman declares that she finds it difficult to create fiction not involving her personal experience. (London Review Books, 2022) She narrates personal experiences meshing them with her critical perspective as a reader and author in a fictional work. In doing so, Batuman defies the limits and traditional classification of genres. Her works reflect a mosaic of various genres as well as different narrative tones. In an interview for The Harvard Crimson, Batuman remarks that she started writing *The Idiot* when she was twenty-three based on her own experience at Harvard; however, she revised the novel at the age of thirty-three. She adds, “I wrote it sort of in an autobiographical spirit and then revised it in the spirit of a novel” (Oreskovic, 2017). One might argue that Batuman’s hybrid style of fiction deepens in *Either/Or*. She carefully blends philosophical interrogations, especially the parts that she ponders in Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* and other canonical works of literature, especially focusing on the problematic representation of female protagonists. She humorously narrates most of the serious issues in her novels. Although *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* are categorized to be fictional works because of the dominant fictional elements, these works are in accordance with Batuman’s description of a novel in *The Possessed*. In the final chapter of *The Possessed*, Batuman states that she formulates the theory of the novel as follows:

...The novel form is “about” the protagonist’s struggle to transform his arbitrary, fragmented, given experience into a narrative as meaningful as his favorite books. Looking back, this is how I understand my interest in Central Asia: there was an actual place you could visit with a language you could learn., that linked my favorite books with one of the more arbitrary and “given” aspects of my life: being Turkish (Batuman, 2010 p. 94).

As she makes it clear Batuman’s fiction emerges as a result of her engagement with other works as well as her cross-cultural identity. As Bakhtin (1981) puts it in *The Dialogic Imagination*, a novel is in a dialogue with other texts and an author’s discourse is shaped by another one’s discourse although authors liberate themselves at one point (p. 348). In the final chapter of *The Possessed*, upon her arrival in Florence to write a magazine article about a Dante marathon, she makes her way to the building where Dostoyevsky finished *The Idiot*. From that point on, she dives into the analysis of *Demons*, the novel she is obsessed with at the time. Upon that, she bases the novel on a theoretical frame referring

to René Girard's *mimetic desire*. According to René Girard, a desiring subject copies a model and it follows a triangle pattern consisting of a subject, model and object. This model entails a paradox because the original is never accessible and all desires copy the others. Girard explains his theory by exemplifying Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, in which the protagonist sets out on a journey to become a knight like the ones he reads in novels. He becomes a copy of the fictional characters and narrates his journey as a fictional character (Airaksinen, 2019, p. 89-90). The reference to Girard connects readers to Batuman's perspective on the theory of a novel. A novel cannot be completely disconnected or alienated from other works; this approach ultimately connects Batuman's novels with other texts making them the main features of her narrative.

In the interview Batuman gave to *The Harvard Crimson*, she elaborates on the connection between *Don Quixote* and *The Idiot*. She points out that when authors add their favorite books in a novel, just as in the case of *Don Quixote*, they get rid of the dullness of ordinary reality. Involving these novels in the narrative, an author adds layers to the narrative. For this reason, she thinks that Selin is a quixotic character. For Selin, books are an important part of her life and she envisages herself as a character in these stories. However, she is also aware that life does not flow the way it happens in her favorite novels. At that point, the reality of personal experiences interferes in the narrative. Batuman adds, "She has these kind of comic misadventures, but they are also very painful, kind of like running into a windmill with a spear would be painful" (Oreskovic, 2017). As she also points out, her style is close to that of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* in several ways. Alonso Quijano (aka Don Quixote), who is a nobleman living in La Mancha in the 17th century, considers himself as a knight after reading numerous chivalric stories and decides to set off on an adventure. The novel narrates the episodic stories of the hero who travels from one place to another to seek new adventures. Likewise, Selin in Elif Batuman's novels explores new places from the USA to Hungary, France, Russia, and Turkey. Batuman's novels also contain picaresque elements such as some satirical, comical and sarcastic features. Both writers are far away from having a grandiloquence manner, rather they reflect an austere style. All of these qualities of Batuman's novels regarding genres create a fusion in Batuman's works making her novels a reflection of her transcended approach to fiction writing.

4.3 Intertextual Aspects

The Idiot and its sequel *Either/Or* are interwoven with ample intertextual references, which also reinforce the transcultural mode of the novel. Readers engage in

several texts from the early nineteenth century to the present day. Although intertextuality encompasses various forms, this study mostly intends to focus on some of the explicit intertextual relationships that contribute to the narrator creating new discourse in her novels.

According to Genette (1997), intertextual aspects of titles are examined under *paratextuality*. The titles of *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* are intertextually linked to other texts. Batuman expresses in some of her interviews and in the epilogue of *The Idiot* that Russian literature, especially Dostoyevsky novels have an impact on her writing experience. Batuman expresses that paying homage to Dostoyevsky is not the only reason why she chose *The Idiot* as the title of her first novel. There are also some similarities between the protagonists of these two novels. To start with, *The Idiot* is considered to be one of the most personal novels of Dostoyevsky like the novels of Batuman. Although the protagonist Nikolayevich Myshkin is called an idiot throughout the novel, he is actually witty and mostly dwells upon philosophical and spiritual matters. Selin similarly questions life struggling to reach the essence of the human condition. Batuman also draws parallels between the two characters stating that Dostoyevsky's character is also a young person who has strong ideas about life (Oreskovic, 2017).

On the other hand, the title of *Either/Or* refers to Søren Kierkegaard's philosophy book in which Kierkegaard dwells on pursuing an aesthetical life versus an ethical life. The first part of the book which also includes "The Seducer's Diary" is dedicated to defending an aesthetical life that involves seducing women, and fostering imagination through art and music, whereas the second part is related to leading an ethical life which involves getting married -which is called *a true blessing*- and having a fulfilled life in ethical terms. Although it is a philosophy book, *Either/Or* includes the elements of fiction. The two parts of the book were written under pseudonyms and the parts were written in the forms of letters, diary notes and essays. Kierkegaard blends genres and presents his philosophical interrogations in a fictional style. From this respect, it is possible to draw a parallel between Batuman's approach to genres and Kierkegaard's style of writing. Batuman also blends features of separate genres in the body of her novels.

In *Either/Or*, Selin ponders over leading an aesthetic or ethical life after Svetlana states that she leads an ethical life (Batuman, 2022, p. 17). Selin reads Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* trying to comprehend how to lead an aesthetic life. The more

she reads, the more she understands the depiction of an aesthetic life in Kierkegaard's book involves torturing women. Meanwhile, she does not also see a point in leading an ethical life since it necessitates getting married and having children as is suggested in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. She especially refers to "The Seducer's Diary" which she finds more interesting than the rest of *Either/Or*. "The Seducer's Diary" is narrated by Johannes who seduces Cordelia, gets engaged to her and then, makes Cordelia call off the engagement at the end since he believes there is no point in marriage in an aesthetic life. According to Johannes, married life is dull and opposes the principles of aesthetic life. Johannes manipulates Cordelia and then, gets bored of her leaving her to seduce other women. When Selin reads "The Seducer's Diary" she relates it to her relationship with Ivan. Although we know that Selin is after an aesthetic life, readers see that the thing she is pursuing is not a life as it is narrated in Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*. From Selin's perspective, neither an aesthetic life is about seducing women, nor is an ethical life about getting married. At the end of the novel, claiming her writing as a female author, she defies the distinction between the two demonstrating that it is possible to pursue an aesthetic life and ethical life without depending on binary oppositions.

The Idiot opens with the epigraph that is a direct reference to the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time*. Consisting of seven parts, *In Search of Lost Time* revolves around Proust's life and his exploration of his identity as an artist. As the title of *In the Shadow of Young Girls in Flower* suggests, Proust revolves around adolescence and the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood exploring the themes of art, passion and friendships. In the epigraph, Batuman quotes Proust: "...In later life we look at things in a more practical way, in full conformity with rest of society, but adolescence is the only period in which we learn anything." This direct quotation foreshadows the rest of the novel in which the heroine Selin observes the world around trying to understand how things work. Likewise, Proust's young protagonist is exploring the themes of love, art and friendship. In both novels, the young protagonists' enthusiasm for being a writer is overwhelmed by being inexperienced in life. Selin starts off her freshman year with a clear idea that she wants to be a writer although she hasn't written anything yet. At the end of the novel, she describes her aspiration for being a writer as *an old idea*. Being completely puzzled by the complexity of life, she has no clear idea about how to do the work of writing. Similarly, young Marcel is full of passion and eagerness to observe life; however, he bursts into tears when he is unable to write a piece to prove his talent in writing (Proust, 2003, p.24). From that moment on, he indulges in impressions leaving

artistic pursuits aside. On the other hand, *In Search of Lost Time* collection is classified as one of the most prominent works of autobiographical novels (Abrams, 1988, p. 16). In the introduction of *The Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*, James Grieve (2003) states “Proust was unsure whether he was writing an essay or a novel. Here is a novel written by a critic and literary theorist, both a novel in the form of an essay and an essay on the novel” (p. 9). One might argue that Proust is an inspiration for Batuman in the way of finding her path as a novelist. Batuman reveals the generic qualities as well as the content of the novel via this subtle reference to Proust in the epilogue.

Batuman’s *The Possessed* is linked with *The Idiot* in a way that *The Idiot* can be better comprehended with the help of *The Possessed*. *The Idiot* was written first; however, it wasn’t published until nearly fifteen years later. Meanwhile, Batuman rewrote the parts of it for *The Possessed*, which was published in 2010. Then, Batuman revised and published *The Idiot* as a novel in 2017. Both works are in a dialogue with other literary works and cultures taking readers on journeys from the West to the East. In *The Possessed*, Elif sets off on several journeys from Stanford to Samarkand, St. Petersburg and Florence. She takes readers to the places in which her favorite novels are written discovering history and language, intersections and differences among these cultures. Likewise, the protagonist Selin in *The Idiot* and later *Either/Or* introduces readers to various characters from different parts of the world.

Some parts of *The Possessed* are directly linked with *The Idiot*, and even some sentences stay the same as the words her linguistics professor writes on the board. “‘Snow is white’ is true if snow is white.’...Outside the window, snow piled deeper and deeper” (Batuman, 2010-2017, p. 16-87). In addition, *The Idiot*’s plot is very briefly introduced to readers in *The Possessed*.

...This association was further strengthened when I myself fell in love with one of my classmates from Russian class, a math major who had briefly studied Russian as a child behind the iron curtain. His Russian name was Valya, which was close to his Hungarian name. He was a senior, and an was going to spend the summer in Budapest before heading to Berkeley for graduate school. I was only a freshman, so clearly, after June, we were never going to see each other again-except that then he somehow got me a summer job with a philanthropic organization that sent American college students to teach English in Hungarian villages (Batuman, 2010, p. 12).

In *The Idiot*, Valya turns out to be Ivan and the narrator Elif shifts to a fictional character

Selin; in this way, the author distances herself from the story to a certain extent. In *The Possessed*, Elif briefly recounts her first year as a freshman at Harvard associating her own experience with a story in a Russian textbook, “The Story of Vera,” which is thematically significant in *The Idiot*, although the title is changed to “Nina in Siberia.” In “The Story of Vera,” the narrator tells a story of a young woman whose boyfriend, Ivan, suddenly moves to Siberia. When she follows him, it turns out that Ivan works in his uncle’s lab and he is married. In the end, Vera falls in love with another physicist there and when Ivan and Vera meet at a conference, he wants to explain everything, but she does not care anymore (Batuman, 2010, p. 17). In *The Idiot* the textbook becomes thematically significant, especially in understanding the representation of female characters in Russian works Selin enjoys reading.

Although the story is briefly summarized in the memoir, Elif associates the story of Vera and Ivan with her relationship with Valya. She describes Valya to be mysterious similar to Ivan who disappears all of a sudden and gets married to another woman in the end. The end of “The Story of Vera” is also reminiscent of the end of Tatiana and Onegin in *Eugene Onegin*, which Selin refers to several times. Selin addresses the correspondence between Nina’s ex-boyfriend and Ivan in the novel. Similar to Ivan’s unexpected departure to Siberia, Ivan of *The Idiot* eventually disappears. Selin follows Ivan to Hungary spending seven weeks of her summer holiday; similarly, Nina traces Ivan to Siberia. Eventually, both Ivans end up being with other women in both stories. However, Selin opposes the idea that all stories must end up with a happy ending and marriage, referring to *Bleak House* and *Crime and Punishment* (Batuman, 2017, p. 102).

Her explicit reference to *Crime and Punishment* and the pseudonym Sonya that Selin takes in Russian class allude to Dostoevsky’s female protagonist Sonia and her relationship with Raskolnikov. In *Crime and Punishment*, to Raskolnikov’s bewilderment, Sonia supports him devotedly even after his confession of committing the murders. Sonia passionately says, “Together, together!’ She repeated it as if it were unconscious, and she hugged him again. ‘I’ll follow you to Siberia” (Dostoyevsky, 2007, p. 417). Despite Sonia being kind and caring, Raskolnikov keeps being hostile towards her until the very end of the novel. He is unable to understand why she is still by his side torturing her with his approach which changes through the novel. One part of the novel in which Raskolnikov and Sonia sit side by side reminds one of the scenes in which Ivan and Selin sit together in Ivan’s room in Hungary. In *Crime and Punishment*, Raskolnikov states that he approaches Sonia because he thinks both are

sinful, and that's why she can understand him; however, the real motive behind Raskolnikov doing that is not clear. Towards the end of *The Idiot*, Selin and Ivan sit side by side talking about their relationship frankly for the first time. Although the chronotope of these two novels is completely different, Ivan watches how Selin suffers with a smile on his face. Selin states that it sometimes feels bad to see him, nearly physically painful and this surprises Ivan. Selin expresses that Ivan smiles and he is actually happy for torturing her in this way (p. 386). To Selin's surprise, Ivan also states that it is a power issue between them when he does not write back. He adds that he thinks she needs the thing between them more because she is alone (p. 384). Although they are intellectuals, both Raskolnikov and Ivan become oppressive characters in different ways. Even if these two stories are shaped in different cultures, contexts and eras, patriarchy finds embodiment through male characters in a similar way. The common point is that female characters suffer in their relationships with men.

When Selin skips some of the classes, she gets a letter from the Freshman Dean's Office about the fact that she needs a signed letter from the class instructor if she wants to continue to take the class. Upon receiving the letter, Selin sees Varvara who is the instructor of the class. Varvara is concerned about Selin and asks if everything is good. Responding to that Selin asks, "Do you think Sonya brings bad luck?... In *Uncle Vanya*, and *Crime and Punishment*. Even in *War and Peace*, she is pathetic" (p. 124). Tolstoy's Sonya is very similar to Dostoyevsky's character being patient, devoted and carrying saint-like qualities. In *War and Peace*, Sonya remarks that she gains her self-worth by sacrificing herself and making others happy in the family (Tolstoy, 2010, p. 1059). Nikolai makes a vow to get married to her before he goes to serve in the war; however, he doesn't keep his vow because of his and his family's debts. Despite resisting at first, he falls in love and decides to get married to a rich heiress in the end. Sonya waits for him devotedly and rejects the proposal of another soldier Dolokhov despite the persistence of Nikolai's mother. Although she understands that Nikolai won't keep his promise, she keeps loving him unconditionally and accepting the truth that marriage is the only way out of his financial troubles. After Nikolai and Marya's marriage, she starts living with them. As Raskolnikov does to Sonya, Nikolai becomes manipulative towards Sonya, he says: "You are an angel: I'm not worthy of you, but I'm afraid of misleading you" (Tolstoy, 2010, p. 394). Selin adopts the name Sonya from seminal Russian novels and places her in an entirely different setting, twenty-first-century Harvard. Being aware of the fact that the life of the female protagonists as it is portrayed

in these novels involves pain, she grows more aware of the importance of subverting this narrative that confines women to suffering in *Either/Or*.

In *Either/Or*, Selin deepens the interrogation with the authors of earlier works using her own writing as a resistance point. She subverts patriarchal discourse not only in classical works from the nineteenth century but also compares the dominant discourse in these works with a twenty-first-century American book. Although Batuman mostly includes characters from Russian literature in her novels, she also refers to American and French literary traditions through the examples of *The Portrait of a Lady* by Henry James and *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert. She refers to Tatiana from Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, Isabel from *The Portrait of a Lady*, Emma from *Madame Bovary* and Anna from Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Tatiana, the female protagonist of *Eugene Onegin* is a smart young woman who loves reading novels as Selin does. She falls in love with Onegin who gets bored of everything quickly and leads a bohemian life due to difficulty in finding meaning in life. Tatiana writes him a letter revealing her love, yet Onegin rejects her. Anna, on the other hand, suffers from the dullness of married life. She is driven by her passion to lead her own life, but eventually, she suffers and dies. Emma, whom Flaubert is critical of since she is into trashy novels, imagines a colourful life but gets stuck in a province with her husband. Her fate is again committing suicide in the end. Despite her passion for books, travel and freedom, Isabel ends up getting married to a man who wants his wife to be obedient causing Isabel to suffer in her marriage, too.

Selin summarizes how Anna is torn between her lover and child drawing a parallel between her own mother and Anna. As Selin elaborates, Tatiana is a character who does not try to have sex with anyone and likes reading just like her. Her mother, however, is a conventional mother. As Selin argues Tatiana is blamed for being impulsive by some for not being strategic. In *Anna Karenina*, Selin exemplifies Kitty who looks towards Vronsky with love and gets no response. After several years, Kitty nearly dies of shame because she did not get a response from Vronsky (Batuman, 2022, p. 74-6). Towards the end of *Either/Or*, Selin identifies with Isabel, the protagonist of *The Portrait of a Lady*, like she does with Tatiana from *Eugene Onegin*. She states that Isabel, who is the same age, creates her own character as a work of art. She does not want to be cruel or mean not because of religious faith, but because it is a part of her character not to be so. Selin draws a parallel between Isabel and Shahrazad in *One Thousand and One Night* in a way that they both try to postpone an upcoming death. Isabel, as she does, wants to discover "fathom of human condition" which is why she

has Henrietta as a friend. Isabel likes to be with different people who have completely different worldviews like Selin. Selin also draws a parallel between Tatiana and Isabel because they both get married and lead unhappy life. After going among female characters of canonical literature, Selin subtly directs the eyes on the authors of these works. She refers to Henry James who said Isabel “had no talent” and “none of the consciousness of genius,” adding:

Well, it made sense. If she could write a book, he would be out of a job. That’s why Madame Bovary had to be too dumb and banal to write Madame Bovary: so Flaubert could have a great humane moment where he said he was Madame Bovary...But I wasn’t dumb or banal, and I lived in the future. Nobody was going to trick me into marrying some loser, and even if they did, I would write the goddamn book myself (Batuman, 2022, p. 322).

One might conclude that Selin draws attention to the necessity of subverting the discourse of patriarchy demonstrating examples from world literature. Tatiana, Anna, Isabel, Emma, Sonya and other female characters she mentions find a place in Batuman’s narrative. Referring to seminal works from a critical perspective, as well as frankly narrating her experiences in Turkey that involve sexual assault, positions Batuman’s writing as a resistance to the discourse which oppresses women. Selin defends women’s writing against the ongoing patriarchal discourse throughout the phases of history. At this point, she cleverly diverts readers’ attention from the nineteenth-century novels to a book written by Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider called *The Rules: Time-Tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr Right*, which was published in 1995 in America. The book supposedly includes the rules to follow to attract men and marry them. Unlike nineteenth-century novels, in which the characters are portrayed in their own circumstances, this book is non-fiction from twentieth-century America. According to the rules, a woman should not frankly express her love to a man. They should not be the initiator of sex and they should behave like they are not interested despite being in love with him (Batuman, 2022, p. 263). Selin draws a parallel between Tatiana and the Rules. She states that *Eugene Onegin* confirmed the Rules since it was only after Tatiana got married that Onegin threw himself at her feet (p. 263). She challenges and subverts male dominance that is a part of the literature of different nations. She remarks:

Nothing in *The Rules* was news, exactly: the eternal defeat of non-lame women, the worthlessness of their “honesty,” the way they so often ended up marrying

lame guys whom they had initially rejected as tedious. It wasn't that I hadn't known these things, but that at some point, without realizing it, I had persuaded myself that I was different—that my honesty and non-lameness wouldn't be punished like that, because I had some special skill, some self-sufficiency, an ability to be alone (Batuman, 2022, p. 265).

Selin's manifestation about claiming her own life and writing is reminiscent of Hélène Cixous's words in her essay "The Laugh of Medusa." Cixous calls out all women to claim their own writing. Cixous emphasizes that women are driven away from women writing similar to the way they are forced to be disconnected from their bodies. She addresses all women pointing out the necessity of putting themselves in their own texts (Cixous, 1976, p. 875). In parallel with the ideas of Cixous, Batuman develops her female protagonist as an empowering female who is able to judge, make a choice and claim herself.

The fact that Selin cannot name sexual assault, or she has been led to experience love in a *certain way*, is a significant part of the whole narrative. In the notes at the end of the novel and in several of her interviews, Batuman refers to the impact of Adrienne Rich's (1980) "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" on her ideas and writing. Rich criticizes the dominant discourse that assumes women are sexually and emotionally oriented towards men. She concerns about the total neglect of lesbian existence adding how women are tortured or left alone if they dare to strengthen their bond with other women. She draws attention to the erasure of the lesbian experience, the idealization of heterosexual romance/marriage in art and literature. Rich states that feminist scholars should acknowledge that societies direct women's energies away from their own bodies and their relationship with other women. She emphasizes the significance of women's companionship and choice of women. She defies the lie imposed on women that women are attracted to men even if it is suicidal (p.632- 658). These intertextual references about the representation of female characters in earlier works and Selin's character development as a young writer, who claims her own writing and makes her own choices at the end of the novel demonstrate that Batuman addresses the significance of women's empowerment. The end of *Either/Or* might be interpreted as a revolt against the representation of female characters in canonical literary works in which female characters eventually suffer in given conditions. Not only do her novels transcend the existing categories of novelistic style, but they also subvert the discourse of oppressed women that is at the heart of cultural productions of various nations. She

masterfully blends her personal experiences challenging particular aspects of her favorite novels creating a transcending perspective out of this fusion.

4.4 Reading Batuman from a Turkish Perspective

Not only the translations from Turkish to English, or vice versa, are strong linguistic and transcultural components of Batuman's novels, but also some references related to Turkish or Turkish cultural identity are very striking from the perspective of a Turkish reader who reads her novels in their original language English. These culture-bound references have a special meaning for Turkish readers or people who lived in Turkey for a particular period in their lives. Although Selin mostly explains the meanings of Turkish expressions for all readers, some of the content is nearly untranslatable.

As Hiroko Inose (2016) indicates, in texts that include dominantly two languages or more, there might be some components that are untranslatable. Hiroko adds, when the second language is profoundly used without the translations provided by the author, it sometimes becomes impossible to fully understand the text. As Hiroko argues, it is difficult to validate the concept of untranslatability; however, there is still difficulty in finding the right words, especially with culturally loaded expressions (p. 220). In Batuman's novels, especially during the conversations between Selin and her family members, in some situations she relates to Turkey, it is possible to trace cultural components that are hard to translate from English into Turkish. Also, there are some situations in which Selin herself has difficulty comprehending because she is not fully proficient in Turkish.

In *The Idiot*, Svetlana and Selin go into a shop selling a lot of Russian products. There is also a shelf that is spared for food coming from Turkey. Here, some famous food brands catch the eye such as Koska, Tat and Eti. Eti biscuits take Selin to a childhood memory of an Eti advertisement with the slogan Eti, Eti, Eti. Selin translates Eti into English as Hittite explaining the reason why the Hittites are loved by Turkish people (Batuman, 2017, p. 41). They are considered to be ancestors of the Turks and for that reason, Anatolia is a homeland for Turkish people. In this scene, individual and national histories intermingle through a memento in a shop in America. Apart from that, this advertisement was first broadcasted in 1972 and it was still popular in the 1990s in Turkey. Eti, being one of the oldest and most popular food production companies in the Republic of Turkey, was so successful with this advertisement that the company broadcasted several advertisements with the same jingle over years. Therefore, this

advert is a part of cultural memory because nearly everyone who is in their thirties and older definitely can hum this jingle. This reference might trigger a sense of nostalgia for Turkish readers.

In several cases, Selin translates some Turkish names into English, which sounds funny when word-for-word translation is made. Selin translates the name of a Turkish guy who sends her an email. His name is Yıldırım Özgüven which is translated as “Thunderbolt Self-confidence.” In another case, she translates the Turkish name Yudum, which means “sip” in English (Batuman, 2017, p. 119, 416). When Turkish names are translated into English, they obviously do not make much sense for a reader who does not know the Turkish language. However, these translations are very funny for a Turkish reader since the names lose all their authenticity when they are translated into English. They also trigger the imagination of readers who know Turkish and read these novels in English. In one other part, Selin names her father’s new wife Nurhan the Second since she shares the same name as her biological mother (Batuman, 2022, p. 28). Nurhan the Second alludes to the Sultans of the Ottoman Empire. These translations become components of the humorous tone in Batuman’s novels.

In *Either/Or*, as well as culture-bound references, readers might notice some misunderstandings between Selin and others because she does not comprehend the meaning of certain Turkish expressions. At a party, Şahin introduces Selin to a Polish friend named Przemyslaw with whom she leaves the party. Şahin, who is unaware at first that Selin and Przemyslaw got closer and decided to leave, asks Selin “What’s new?” in Turkish. Selin replies that everything is good. Then, the conversation goes between the two as follows: “You don’t have to jump,” he said. “To jump?” I repeated. He nodded emphatically. “You don’t have to jump. I’m here” (Batuman, 2022, p. 219). To jump is “atlamak” in Turkish; however, the meaning of the word might change depending on the context. Here it basically means he does not have to leave with the guy she has just met. Şahin emphasizes that “I’m here” implying that it is not a good idea to leave with Przemyslaw or he does not approve of it. However, Selin does not understand it and leaves with Przemyslaw. Şahin uses a slang expression to warn Selin not to go with him; however, Selin does not get the message. Similar to the aforementioned expressions, the word “jump” in this context might sound ambiguous for readers who do not know Turkish.

Even though Selin uses English to narrate conversations she hears in the family circle, she points out culture-bound situations or explains these conversations as much

as she understands them in *Either/Or*. While describing transcultural literature, Nordin (2013) points out that another language might seep into the dominant language of the narrative. An author might use his/her other language in dialogues. At this point, readers may not be directly indicated about these interruptions; therefore, they need the background knowledge to be able to realize the function and purpose of these shifts (p. 227). In one part of the novel, she describes the way people dump out a pot of water when someone leaves behind the person's back. Then, she translates, "come back quickly like water" (p. 284). Selin also adds people cry while they are saying farewells. After the 1940s, Turkish people started to migrate to cities leaving their homes in rural areas in order to find better employment opportunities. After a worker agreement was signed between Turkey and Germany, and then with several other European countries, people in Turkey started to immigrate to cities in foreign countries to financially support their families. This massive migration flow leads to the separation of family members causing an emotional burden for both the ones who leave and the others that are left behind. Most Turkish citizens have at least one family member or relative who left the country. Therefore, farewell moments in these families are generally distressing. "Come quickly like water" which is "*Su gibi git, su gibi gel*," is a commonly used idiom to express a desire for the person to return home as quickly as possible.

In *Either/Or*, readers also witness that Selin uses the word *Maşallah* in two situations without translating the word into English. In one scene, Selin's grandmother learns that she keeps a diary and says "Ah, maşallah, my girl is always writing, ah ah, you write your diary" (p. 161). In another scene, Aunt Arzu and Şenay see Selin's heavy backpack and state that she cannot carry it. Selin's grandmother states, "My strong girl, maşallah, she carries everything" (p. 295). Then, they compare Selin to a *hamal* and a *yörük* which are two other familiar expressions for Turkish readers. Selin explains the meaning of *yörük* and *hamal*. *Yörüks* are nomadic people who live in the mountains in Anatolia and the Balkan peninsula. *Hamal* is, on the other hand, street porters who work carrying a wicker basket on their backs. Porters are still very common in Turkey, especially in street markets. On the other, *maşallah* which comes from the Arabic phrase, *Mashallah* is often used to express awe when somebody does something extraordinary and succeeds in something. Also, *maşallah* is used to wish God to protect the person from the evil eye.

To conclude, in both *The Idiot* and *Either/Or*, there are some translatable expressions; however, Turkish readers might perceive these references from a different

point of view intermingling them with their own national and personal histories. These references add another layer to Batuman's novels, enabling readers to have a transcultural reading experience.



CONCLUSION

This study aimed at revealing transcultural aspects in Elif Batuman's novels *The Idiot* and its sequel *Either/Or*. Revolving around the themes of youth, love, friendships, mobility, reading experience and the transitional stage of growing up, Batuman presents readers multi-layered and polyphonic novels selecting her characters with different cultural backgrounds and points of view. Being close to autofiction, Batuman's novels reflect the richness of her cross-cultural Turkish-American identity as well as her academic background. The protagonist Selin is a Quixotic character who sets off on journeys to find her path in life under the guidance of her favorite novels. Although the protagonist Selin begins with the idea of living her life like the characters of her favorite novels, her experiences throughout *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* help her differentiate on the way to being a novelist one day.

In this research, the intention was to analyze Batuman's fiction from a transcultural perspective, mainly benefitting from the studies on transcultural literature. In the theoretical framework, the development of the transcultural theory was scrutinized, especially based on Wolfgang Welsch's philosophical approach to transculturalism. Welsch (1999) considers transculturalism as macro and micro-level structures. At a macro level, transculturalism involves dynamic and ongoing interaction among cultures through intense migration flows, advancing communication technologies and financial issues. On the other hand, at a micro level, transculturalism is a more individual concept that is built through interpersonal relationships. As Welsch argues, individual lives are the areas that one can trace the reflections of transculturality since it is difficult to perceive the fluid nature of cultures at a macro-level. For this reason, transculturalism, as it was suggested by Welsch, has been deployed in transcultural literary studies under the categories of Postcolonial and Comparative Literature studies.

Transcultural literary studies, on the other hand, mostly apply transculturalism to the texts of authors who represent more than one nation. From a transcultural perspective, the *in-between* space for transcultural individuals is an enriching area in which the most creative pieces of art are produced. Although residing *in-between* might be painful, it is also an area from which creativity springs; therefore, it is appreciated from the transcultural approach. Transcultural authors or the characters in their novels do not have to feel an attachment to the stable categories of identity, they might adopt a perspective that goes beyond the idea of belonging.

Although the notion of a transcultural novel is not precisely defined by the scholars who research transcultural literary studies, Helff (2009) and Dagnino (2015) concur that these novels still display some common features. To begin with, these novels take place in multiple settings, and characters move physically or virtually among various locations. In these novels, characters are bilingual or they are multilingual. In addition, transcultural characters approach nations and national identities from a distant and objective perspective. Therefore, they are more aware of inconsistencies and prejudicial thoughts towards others that lie in the inner structure of societies. These characters are on a quest for themselves as well as the world around them. They bring different perspectives together mediating among them. These characters prioritize interpersonal relationships, exchanging ideas and positioning themselves outside to gain a broader perspective in the process of constructing their transcultural identity.

Transcultural literary studies are also exploratory about linguistic components in transcultural novels. As Dagnino (2015) and Helff (2009) suggest, transcultural authors tend to mix genres, use metafictional devices and create characters who question themselves in their novels. Due to the fact that the authors of these novels are mostly bilingual, their texts generally involve more than one language. Be it visible or not, another language, other than the main language of these novels penetrates the narrative. Apart from that, foreign expressions might be inserted in the narrative as a reflection of the polyphonic nature of these novels. Since these novels involve characters from different cultural backgrounds, they are polyphonic and dialogic by their very nature in accordance with the Bakhtinian understanding of the novel.

Since Batuman's novels are polyphonic and highly intertextual, intertextual analysis, which is about revealing the existence of various texts in the body of a single work, became a part of this study. Intertextuality is also a method that is frequently referred to by academicians who analyze texts from a transcultural perspective. In addition, since intertextual relationships are significant in terms of revealing cultural engagement in texts, it becomes a significant component of transcultural novels as well. Deploying intertextuality was also significant in the analysis of Batuman's fiction in order to be able to comprehend how the protagonist Selin constructs her transcultural identity as an author. Selin uses other texts she has read as well as the people she has met as a guide to improve herself as an author. Therefore, she especially draws attention to the female characters of canonical works and at the end of *Either/Or*, it is observed

how she subverts the dominant discourse in these novels and transcends it through her own writing experience.

One of the main themes of transcultural literature is characters' approach to national identity. In accordance with this feature of transcultural novels, the first chapter of this study aimed at revealing how prejudicial/stereotypical thinking is represented in Batuman's fiction. These issues are addressed from an objective perspective by the narrator. The protagonist Selin not only objectively demonstrates the injustices in societies, but she also liberates herself from a biased perception. Likewise, Svetlana and Ivan undermine fixed categories of identity, replacing fixity with fluidity, interaction and movement. At the end of *Either/Or*, Selin's decision to fly to Russia indicates a strong character who makes her own choice. She expresses that she does not go there because of her family or her job, she goes there because she wants to be there. On a symbolic level, she undermines the notion of belonging by making a choice. Other than that, Selin, Svetlana, Ivan and most of the other characters prioritize being on the move to being stable; therefore, they find ways to go beyond themselves through the mutual exchange of ideas with people on the road.

At this point, Harvard University holds significance for being the intersection for people coming from different countries. Harvard enables the characters to create a new culture through the confluence of different views and cultural backgrounds. Drawing on Dagnino's notion of *transplace* (2015), Harvard becomes a *transplace* that is inclusive towards diversity and differing perspectives. It is a place which creates an open space for interaction and mutual engagement. Not only Harvard is portrayed as a *transplace*, but also the growing importance of virtual space is addressed in Batuman's fiction. The internet, as a transcultural space, is represented in alignment with the transcultural perspective. Selin makes an analogy between electronic messages and interpersonal relationships that are updated and renewed at any time. Selin's father, on the other hand, refers to the fact that the internet connects the world at the very beginning of *The Idiot*.

Mobility, which is one of the outstanding characteristics of transcultural literature, was also discussed in this study. Being on the road and travelling to various destinations around the world are valorized by most of the young characters in Batuman's novels. However, Batuman's characters are not just depicted as world travelers, they also prioritize learning the language, culture and history of the places they visit. Drawing on Braidotti's (2002) notion of *neo-nomadic subject*, Selin and other

characters continually cross borders both by being physically active and by being open towards others. The histories of the places they visit and encounters on the road intermingle, becoming an aspect of their transcultural identity. On her journeys from Paris, Budapest, and Istanbul, to Ankara, Central Anatolia, and the Mediterranean Coast of Turkey, Selin encounters many people from different walks of life with differing perspectives. In doing so, she brings together characters from different parts of the world. She narrates the stories of historical buildings as well as artworks by interviewing them like threads of a web and opening the doors of different worlds for the readers of her novels.

Not only does Batuman reflect cultural diversity in her novels, but she also inserts diverse languages in her narrative. As well as including Turkish expressions, idioms and proverbs, she opens a space for languages like Hungarian, Russian, French, and constructed languages like Esperanto. In alignment with the transcultural approach, she includes foreign expressions in her narrative enhancing the polyphonic nature of her novels. She translates expressions from various languages moving among different modes of expression. Although she is not fluent, the main character Selin is able to speak several languages; therefore, she is able to indicate the similarities and differences among languages. She discusses these similarities with Svetlana, Ivan and Juho who come from different cultural backgrounds. The struggle to understand the very nature of languages becomes a way of finding out about each other for the characters.

Rather than writing fiction in a traditional way, Batuman blends genres in her novels in an innovative way. Her novels are regarded to be closer to autofiction since she blends autobiography and fictional elements in her works. The narrative of *The Idiot* and *Either/Or* gets closer to the essay format, epistolary form and fictional style in different parts of the novels. She smoothly moves among different genres similar to the way she moves among languages, cultures and canonical works of literature. Not only does Batuman interconnect genres in her fiction, but she also brings together literary works from different national literatures. Directing the attention mainly towards the representation of female protagonists, she subverts male dominant discourse in these novels bringing them into the setting of a contemporary novel. Selin both pays homage to the authors of these novels and becomes the voice of female protagonists who were ultimately oppressed in their own particular ways. Regardless of their national background, she brings together female protagonists from English, French, Arabic and

Russian literature. Selin connects all of these characters, transcending and liberating herself being a female author who makes her own choices and claims her own writing.

The final section of this study aimed at pointing out some references relating to Turkish cultural identity from the perspective of a Turkish reader. Although the narrator Selin mostly translates Turkish conversations into English within the novels, there are still some *untranslatable* cultural components that make more sense to people who lived in Turkey at least for a period of their lives. At this point, Selin's personal history intermingles with cultural history enabling a transcultural reading experience for Turkish readers who read these novels in English.

To conclude, bringing together various genres, languages, cultures and stories, Batuman's fiction reflects a multi-voiced narrative and a transcending perspective. She blurs the boundaries among borders, languages, cultures and works of literature meshing them harmoniously in her narrative. In doing so, she defies the restrictions imposed on individuals by fixed categories of identity. Bearing these features, Batuman's novels provided the ground for this study within the framework of the transcultural approach.

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