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Female Stories of Migration in Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei* and in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Women often deliver fictional accounts of personal memories pertaining to historical and cultural events in ways that differ from the traditionally male-centered or Western perspective of history. In her *Against Amnesia*, for example, Nancy Peterson thematizes the desire of contemporary women writers to engage their own subjective histories.[1] Emine Sevgi Özdamar's acclaimed *Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei hat zwei Türen aus einer kam ich rein aus der anderen ging ich raus* (1992; henceforth *Karawanserei*) and Toni Morrison's popular success *Beloved* (1987) are two prominent examples for such a reclamation of the female voice in the cultural memories of the West, which probably accounts for the vast array of scholarly studies devoted to those works.[2] Even though the historical, cultural, and literary circumstances from which Özdamar's and Morrison's stories emanate are of course significantly different, both are accounts of migration which assert a specifically female approach to coping with cultural and geographic displacement. Some issues of «minorities» and «migration» that reach beyond the local are important themes of Özdamar's works, as they are of particular resonance for women, thus yielding broader implications for understanding the politics of migration in today's European and global contexts. As my comparison with Morrison's text will show, some of the narrative techniques employed by Özdamar are not only shaped by a Turkish-Islamic mystic tradition of orality, as has been shown elsewhere (Müller, Ghaussy), but also share a common, evidently meta-cultural, subjective desire to (re)claim history, to recover, to make personal, and thus bearable, memories that otherwise seem lost or removed from the subject. These subjective memories seem lost to the Western historical memory by being part of «official,» in Özdamar's case, male-centered Turkish history; they seem removed by the geographic and cultural distance between Germany and Turkey, and these memories seem lost again because they belong to a personal, individual approach to coping with the competing forces of Islam and Westernization. Similarly, Morrison's work is defined by the the female protagonist Sethe's need to «rememory,» also a way of appropriating history, in this case the history of slavery and abolition. The

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novel traces relevant stages in Sethe's and her family's past to uncover the conditions that led to the infanticide she had performed on her daughter Beloved, who has now come back into Sethe's and her younger daughter Denver's present lives as a ghost. Similar to the characters in Özdamar's novel, Sethe, too, struggles to present a woman's personal and decidedly subjective performance of rememberance to claim for herself that which had been taken repeatedly: Once by the exploitive and oppressing domination on the part of the slave owners and their oral accounts, and again by the ways in which history is appropriated via the canonizing force of the victorious white male culture, which, either way, won the Civil War.

Because of their common struggle to assert a personal, female, and minority perspective, both works employ similar narrative strategies. As Carole Boyce Davies argues in «Migratory Subjectivitity,» asserting femaleness along with blackness (or any other «minority» status) allows to deliver fresh accounts of a past traumatized by personal and cultural loss, by dislocation, and by struggles for physical and psychological survival (999). This notion is, I believe, further underscored in Özdamar's most recent work, *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde* (2003), an autobiographical account of a female protagonist's migratory experience, now extended to her continuous border-crossings between East and West Berlin, where the female perspective is emphasized.

Thus, my comparative study of Özdamar's and Morrison's accounts of migration will demonstrate how *Karawanserei* and *Beloved* offer strategies to cope with the specifically female experience of migration and cultural displacement by encouraging women to rely on their subjective memories, rather than remaining victims of any officially sanctioned versions. I choose these two texts since they exemplify how two distinct narrative accounts of two historically, geographically, and culturally separate instances of cultural displacement can both turn into accounts of female heroism, and, ultimately, victory over each individual situation. By juxtaposing Özdamar's and Morrison's novels, I am hoping to pursue the approach suggested by Monika Shafi and others for «migrant literature» by «Turkish-German» writers: to go beyond the limitations of «foreignness» or «minor literature,» and instead draw «attention to the multi-layered space in which cultures interact, collide, and segregate» (Shafi 198).[3] Let me stipulate at this point that I have no intention to significantly engage the vast amount of scholarship on Toni Morrison's work. To do so would clearly exceed the scope of this article, and would also draw away from my focus, to offer a comparative reading of Özdamar's and Morrison's texts within the context of female agency and the transcendence of national boundaries.

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In what follows, I will explore how textual strategies, in particular, the narrative technique of «magical realism,» or, as some critics refer to it, «magic realism,» work to situate both texts, *Karawanserei* and *Beloved*, within a grid of female agency that seeks to overcome trauma by asserting individual accounts of migration and oppression. Sheila Johnson's careful analysis of *Karawanserei*'s artistic structure already engages some of the earlier scholarly discussion on magical realism and draws our attention to Özdamar's aesthetic achievement. In using magical realism as a marker for uncovering intersections between the works, I am of course aware of the fact that both writers may reject the categorization of their works as «magical realist,» but I believe that it is the duty of anyone engaging a text critically to probe a reading that focuses on the text itself rather than following authors' – often staged and/or contradictory – directives. Hopefully, the results of my analysis will show how female stories of migration in today's world are indeed «global,» in that narrative strategies such as magical realism can function as mediators that help texts depict different cultural blends in different cultural and geographical settings.

Much of the earlier scholarly engagement with Özdamar's text focused on establishing a binary account in which the Turkish language along with Islamic culture and iconography are posited in opposition to the German language and Western cultural context. While such a reading is of course legitimate, and may have been inspired by the early debate on the question of whether and how this text fits into «German» literature,[4] emphasizing the notion of hybridity and cultural difference as markers for both the text and the minority/migrant experience often reiterates that very difference, thus falling short of exploring the nature of the relationship between dominant host culture and the way minorities seek to be heard within that culture. Similarly, discourses on «minority» literature often fall prey to the general problem of how to articulate cultural difference without inadvertently marginalizing the minority culture in question. Leslie Adelson has elaborated on this problem in her seminal essay «Opposing Oppositions.» In this context, my cross-national and cross-cultural exploration of *Karawanserei* will instead focus on how the female subject can overcome her oppression by departing from the conventions of literary realism. With my analysis of strategies of magical realism in both works, I also hope to escape the opposition of «major» vs. «minor» literature.[5]

Arguing that magical realism is a central component of contemporary international narrative, Wendy B. Faris, in her decidedly inclusive attempt at delineating a set of characteristics for magical realism, asserts that the magical elements in texts that work with magical realism (be they Latin-American,

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Western, or post-colonial) evoke an intentional disruption of the logic of cause and effect (168). Such a disruption, appearing at the very beginning of *Karawanserei* with the depiction of the female protagonist's voice and feelings while still in the maternal womb, works to question the logic of the traditional, implicitly male-centered, narrative form per se, and at the same time establishes the narrative perspective as female: once via the mother who is carrying the as yet unborn child in a train full of male soldiers, the second time, by supplying the unborn child with both her own senses, and a gendered perspective: «Ich dachte im Bauch, mein Vater ist auch Soldat, sein Mantel stinkt wahrscheinlich auch wie die Mäntel hier. Ich werde später die Stinkvatertochter» (Özdamar 10). This intentional disruption of traditional (male) narrative logic raises interesting questions concerning the role of female voices in the text. In her lucid article on *Karawanserei*, Soheila Ghaussy sees the women's voices in the text as nomadic, and she therefore reads an absence of fixity and authority into their voices. While I agree with Ghaussy's interpretation concerning the destabilizing effect of the hybrid and creolized language employed by women in Özdamar's novel, I do think that there is authority in the female voice (i.e. the nomadic female voice is not reduced to the status of a victim), an authority located in the historical embodiment of the past and the future that is evoked by magic. In this example, the female voice of a fetus in the maternal womb takes control from before the beginning, recalling the birthing scene in *Die Blechtrommel*, albeit with reversed gender roles. The intertextual reference to Grass' work is obvious while emphasizing the sexual difference of the child-protagonist in *Karawanserei* and underscoring the double meaning of her femininity: similar to Oskar Mazerath she views the world through the eyes of a seemingly naïve and innocent, yet knowing child, a corrupt world of adults – the dominant culture – which s/he intends to subvert/resist. However, unlike Oskar, *Karawanserei*'s protagonist does grow up, and Özdamar's «re-construction of the ‹innocent› voice of a child with her ‹wide-open olive eyes› and ‹deranged› or ‹crazed› perspective» (Ghaussy) later becomes the voice of a mature and strong woman who leaves Turkey at the age of eighteen. This textual reference to Grass' use of magical realism would thus emphasize the maturing of the female voice, since Grass' male child-protagonist never grows up and remains the naïve observer, whereas Özdamar's female protagonist does.

A similar disruption of the narrative logic of cause and effect evoked by «irreducible magic» is evident in Morrison's *Beloved*, when the sudden appearance of Beloved coincides with the disappearance of the – until then – nameless ghost. At this textual moment, Sethe's need to urinate (a reference also to the rupture of the amniotic membranes or «bag of water» in the birthing

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process) corresponds directly to Beloved's uncanny thirst (Morrison 48). Not only does this event mark the beginning of female agency in that Paul D, the only male, is slowly driven from the house, it also marks the beginning of Beloved's active role in bringing back the memories of Sethe's life story, which Sethe had hoped to suppress. Again, we have a female voice being «born,» and again, the agency of this voice helps to defeat the helplessness and suffering of women. In *Karawanserei*, the protagonist remembers her own life story as it intersects with that of others, and in Morrison's novel, Beloved's physical presence activates the suppressed memories of Sethe, the female protagonist. With Özdamar's use of magical realist strategies, *Blechtrommel*, a now canonized work of previously «subversive» German literature provides the foil – the dominant culture – against which a new female identity asserts itself, revealing Özdamar's thorough engagement with the German tradition while establishing her own, fresh tradition of migrant literature.

Another, related, primary characteristic of magical realism as described by Faris is the extensive use of detail from the phenomenal world, in such a way that the departure from classical realism is clearly visible, but where the events are firmly grounded in historical reality. As Faris points out, such characteristics often serve to deliver «alternate versions of officially sanctioned accounts» (169–70). An example of this extensive use of detail in *Karawanserei* is the beard of the grandfather that turns into a carpet which then displays images recounting events from Turkish history as well as the family's personal history (Özdamar 38–47). While the images are inscribed into the beard of a male authority, the patriarchal grandfather figure, they are ultimately utilized by the female narrator who appropriates them and lends them new authority along with a revision of the female subject's past and present. As such, the migratory status of both the female voice and the narrative technique itself become tools of power rather than signaling resignation. At the same time, the inscription serves to delineate alternate accounts of history: the same story is told twice, but with a very different emphasis concerning the fate of the woman involved. In the first narration of the story as part of the grandfather's beard or «carpet,» the protagonist's maternal grandmother is dragged to death by her husband's horse for having colored her hands with henna while away at a wedding, supposedly in joyous celebration of the death of her husband's additional, concurrent wife's son (Özdamar 46–47). However, later in the narrative, Fatma, the protagonist's mother, recounts that very same incident to her daughter. This time, we read that women always color their hands at weddings, and that although her husband did in fact drag her over rocky paths, there was no way the grandmother could have known about the death

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of the other woman's son while attending the wedding. The woman is then revealed as an innocent victim of libel. In Fatma's version, the grandmother also did not die from the abuse, but died later from pneumonia, having forgiven her husband his cruelty (Özdamar 72). While the narrative embedded in the grandfather's «carpet-beard» provides extensive detail grounded in historical reality, this reality appears partly discredited by the magical frame (or beard-carpet) in which it appears. At the same time, the personal (male) narrative, also part of this complicated texture of magical and realist elements, is even further discredited later in the book, when the female voice reveals the «true» events leading to the unjustified punishment, thereby pointing to the abuse and cruelty fostered by polygamy. Of course, we can never be entirely certain which account is «true,» thus we are challenged to further question the grandfather's narrative authority. Even more importantly, Özdamar here employs her female protagonist to explicitly criticize not only, as one might expect, the Western world, and the practices of Western exploitation, but also the patriarchal practices of traditional Turkish culture. This is significant in that the text here clearly departs from what used to be termed «German-Turkish» literature, since the issue is not a conflict between the loss of traditional Turkey and the difficulties with the new, secularized Germany, but rather a female voice who stakes out her ground against both the Western and the traditional culture.

Since the history of African slaves is largely unwritten and continues to be based on oral accounts and collective memory, magical elements in *Beloved* serve to negotiate between different personal accounts of the slave experience, instead of offering differing views from officially sanctioned accounts (as in *Karawanserei*). One example concerns Sethe's confusion when the ghost, presumably Beloved's, chokes her as she reflects on Baby Suggs' role in the community (Morrison 89–91). While Sethe is mislead into thinking that it was Baby Suggs' ghost who choked her, her daughter, Denver, not only understands that it is really Beloved, but eventually succeeds in overcoming both her own painful past as well as that of her family. This difference in the experiences of Sethe and her daughter is indicative also of their experiences with slavery per se: Denver only knows slavery as mediated through her mother, she has no personal or physical recollection except for the traumatic memories that she encounters in those around her. Through Denver, we learn that recovering from slavery is indeed possible, and that there is hope for the African-American community outside of Cincinnati. At the same time, Sethe's personal history, including her subversive act of infanticide, mediated through Denver's experiences, becomes part of a collective, and, through the narrative itself, an «official» account. Here, the magical elements serve not to

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deliver alternate accounts of official history, but to synthesize different personal accounts in order to foster an understanding of slavery and the migratory experience. As in *Karawanserei*, female agency and empowerment prevail, Denver learns to write, thereby giving voice to her mother's past and her family's history of slavery and migration.

A further trait of magical realism that Faris illucidates in her discussion concerns the instilling of doubt and hesitation in the reader. Both texts trigger this effect. In *Beloved*, the reader is forced to navigate through different characters' memories. For instance, Sethe's point of view is often changed to include that of Paul D or Denver. This technique, interspersed with the appearance and disappearance of Beloved first as a ghost, and then in the shape of a «real» girl, are purposely unsettling and keep the reader wondering about whose story is being told. Along similar lines, *Karawanserei*'s nameless protagonist interrupts the chronological narrative of her life's experiences to include repeated lists of prayers, of sounds that she recalls, or of the dead that she counts before going to sleep. Furthermore, the seeming logic of the narrative is often subverted by a free association of themes, rather than moving along any expected narrative or temporal order. Those elements serve to disorient the reader most productively: we constantly have to ask ourselves where we are in the story line, and often have to move on to another episode while the previous one is left open for our own imagination. At the end, we can no longer be entirely sure what was actually told, and what we were left to imagine. In the case of *Karawanserei,* such an intentional play with reader expectations can also be read as a female strategy of seduction and illusion, a female strategy empowered by escaping the expectations of a traditional (male) reader response.[6] At the same time, this very technique also emulates the Brechtian notion of estrangement for the purpose of forcing the reader to creatively engage the text.

In addition to the previously discussed primary characteristics of magical realism, Wendy Faris assembles a list of secondary characteristics. I would like to elaborate on one of those, since I believe that it yields the most relevant findings for our analysis of magical realism as a tool to transcend borders and boundaries. Faris's assertion that magical realist texts often take a position against an established social order is true for both works.

Karawanserei subverts established social orders by decidedly rejecting rules of semantics and of grammar. Often, this textual strategy is misunderstood as the representation of a childlike or «naïve» point of view on the part of the protagonist (most obviously in Ghaussy), and thus reinforces the notion of a binary opposition between a (male) «German» and (female) «Turkish» culture, or language (with the Turkish language/culture of course being

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the more «primitive,» less «developed» one). Kader Konuk's contention of this textual strategy as a «migration of language» that is highly poetic, but which also produces a disturbing and alienating effect on the reader by inventing semantic hybrids, such as «Mundhure» or «Geduldstein,» is more productive for our purposes, since Konuk's article invokes the idea of blurring the boundary between self and other, between German and foreigner, and, implicitly, between the centers and the margins of a culture (Konuk 151–2). Özdamar's use of semantic hybrids and their alienating and disturbing effects call into question Germany's social order by forcing the reader to form new connotations within the frame of German culture. Since many of those hybrids pertain to issues of sexuality, and, more specifically, to female sexuality, not only Germany's social order and societal norms, but also the culture and religion of patriarchal Turkey are questioned from the perspective of a female migrant.

A similar subversion of established orders is apparent in *Beloved*, when the three female main characters are presented in three separate chapters, each one witness to a different personal account within the same narrative. Especially the segment characterizing Beloved's role rejects grammatical, structural, and semantic parameters of standard English, albeit not via the invention of semantic hybrids, but rather via a rhythmic and poetic language borrowed from the oral tradition of the slave narrative that substitutes punctuation with mere spaces between fragments of sentences, and structural coherence with floating imagery: «I am standing in the rain falling the others are taken I am not taken I am falling like the rain is» (Morrison 202).[7] This, too, may be considered a hybrid, a «creole» mixture of standard English and African-American slave narrative. Throughout the text, African-American direct speech is reproduced with its violations of standard grammar, and the subversive power of this violation becomes an important theme in the novel itself: «They sang it out and beat it up, garbling the words so they could not be understood; tricking the words so their syllables yielded up other meanings» (Morrison 108). In Morrison's text, the African-American subversion of a white, dominating society is at stake, while the violation of grammar and semantics in *Karawanserei* serves to communicate the difficulties encountered by many individuals who migrated from Turkey to Germany.

In both texts, the markers of cultural hybridity are formulated and expressed by female characters who operate within a male-dominated structure. However, the cultural and linguistic hybridity presented by Özdamar is even more complex, because the female protagonist's experiences in Turkey are already characterized by a mixture of Islamic and Western secularized culture (as indicated by the references in the novel to Tom Mix comics, bubble gum,

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the attempts of the protagonist's father to stylize himself as an American film star, etc.).[8] Also, the migratory experience described in the novel itself is not the protagonist's migration to Germany, but rather the migration within different parts of a Turkey haunted by economic and societal pressures after World War II. I would even go as far as to say that *Karawanserei* as well as Özdamar's more recent works are as much about the Americanization and Westernization of Turkish culture and society as they are about the protagonist's experiences of cultural difference and German domination. Or, put differently, the perpetrator (Germany), responsible for exploiting Turkish guest workers and for discriminating against those who were born and raised in Germany but considered «foreigners» based on their or their parents' national origin, becomes part of a larger, more all-encompassing force: the economic hardship caused by global capitalism not only provides the initial impetus for migration from Turkey to Germany, to a certain extent it also deprives the Turkish «middle class» of the means necessary to sustain themselves within their culture. Margrit Frölich already pointed to the striking autonomy of the female protagonist within this setting of double repression (Frölich 67).[9] In this context, what may seem as an escape from an economically and culturally oppressive past, the protagonist's decision to leave Turkey and migrate to Germany at the very end of of the novel, may actually be read as a gesture of autonomy. In leaving her home and deciding to become a «migratory subject» (Davies) not only within her own culture, but transcending into a completely foreign one, Özdamar's protagonist makes a conscious effort to claim her personal space within the forces of globalization and Westernization. Thus, she may be more able to come to terms with the structures in which her parents had failed to carve out an existence. By remembering and rewriting her own past, however, she also retains the memories of her own culture. It is this transition, I would argue, that renders Özdamar's protagonist's migratory experience global: just as Denver has to cross the boundaries of 124 Bluestone Road and participate in the larger context of American society in order to overcome her oppressive past, *Karawanserei*'s migratory experience reaches beyond the physical migration of the protagonist from Turkey to Germany and stretches to a migration between cultures, not necessarily between the minority and the dominant culture, but rather between different grades of Westernization. The migrating subject as a woman, then, negotiates not only the changing forces of globalization and Westernization, but also her gendered identity.

This notion is underscored in Özdamar's latest novel, *Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde*. The same protagonist who «arrived» in Germany at the end of *Karawanserei*, is now, during the 1970s, migrating between East and West

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Berlin due to her employment in East Berlin. Many textual references and narrative elements here point to the cultural and political differences between East and West, rather than emphasizing the differences between the protagonist's country of origin, namely Turkey, and Germany.

Both *Karawanserei* and *Beloved* thus recall what Homi Bhabha has termed «the deep stirring of the unhomely,» and thus, according to Bhabha, display a form of realism «that is unable to contain the anguish of cultural displacement and diasporic movement.» (Bhabha, «The World» 367). But, at the same time, Bhabha suggests in the introduction to his seminal *The Location of Culture*, that «such conditions of cultural displacement and social discrimination – where political survivors become the best historical witnesses – are the grounds on which Franz Fanon (…) locates an agency of empowerment» (Bhabha, *Location* 8). In Bhabha's terms, then, both *Karawanserei* and *Beloved* are situated in a «beyond»: «beyond» Germany and «beyond» Turkey as well as «beyond» America. In retaining local identities through their stories of female empowerment, they shape today's global experiences. Even though she has not yet migrated to Germany herself, Özdamar's nameless protagonist may tell us more about today's Germany than those individuals who were never subject to any political or cultural migration and dislocation.

Instead of insisting on an East-West (or, in the case of Morrison's novel, North-South and black-white) binary, we should then perhaps understand narrative strategies like magical realism not just as tools to undermine that very binary, but more significantly as mediators that help texts depict different cultural blends. Similarly, I would argue, we should stop talking about «German-Turkish» literature, and instead ask what we learn from each individual migratory experience. Just as we would not question the extent to which Morrison's text is part of «American» literature, we should not think about Özdamar's works as that of a «Turkish-» German writer and instead think of her work as clearly rooted in the traditions of German, European, and South American literature. While we may not wish to think of Özdamar as a «German writer,» since this would neglect an important aspect of her artistic and cultural identity, both Morrison's and Özdamar's novels can and should be considered «migrant literature,» a label that may transcend and even defy the need for categorization into a national literature.

Along similar lines, it may not be productive to evoke Morrison's works only in the context of «multiculturalism» or «minority» literature, since this implicitly limits the scope and depth of the reception of her work to those readers who feel compelled to engage with such «minority» works. Both novels are part of the Western tradition, but they are not part of this Western tra-

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dition because they use narrative strategies employed by writers canonized within a Western tradition (such as Günter Grass). Instead, they are, as Homi Bhabha argues, part of migrant literature as a new world literature: «where, once, the transmission of national traditions was the major theme of a world literature, perhaps we can now suggest that transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees – may be the terrains of world literature» (Bhabha, *Location* 9).

Even though Bhabha's notion of an empowerment via cultural displacement may sound rather optimistic, both Morrison's *Beloved* and Özdamar's *Karawanserei* serve as narrative performances of this very optimism. When we think about today's situation for immigrants in Germany, we can probably use every bit of the optimism that both these stories of female migration evoke.

Notes

[1] Peterson furthermore explicates the extent to which Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as well as *Jazz* and *Paradise* function as a «black history book.» (Peterson, 51–97).

[2] Just as a few examples, by no means an exhaustive bibliography, see Ghaussy, Konuk, and Wierschke on the subject of Özdamar and migration; see Barnes, Bhabha, and Peterson on Morrison and migration.

[3] See also Leslie A. Adelson, «The Turkish Turn in Contemporary German Literature and Memory Work.»

[4] In the context of the Bachmann-Prize competititon, see Karen Jankowsky's excellent discussion on the subject.

[5] For a detailed discussion on this problem, cf. Leslie A. Adelson, «Opposing Oppositions,» 305–30 and Kader Konuk, «Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei,»143–161, here especially 153–6 as well as Monika Shafi, 197–8.

[6] In this context, it might also be interesting to consider a feminist take on Wolfgang Iser's and Hans Robert Jauss' reader-response theories from the 1970s. Even though a female strategy of seduction and illusion may again evoke a different negative stereotype of women, I would argue that a post-feminist reading could interpret such a strategy as a self-conscious play with such stereotypes.

[7] For the entire section of Beloved's personal account, see Morrison, 200–203.

[8] See Margrit Frölich, «Reinventions of Turkey: Emine Sevgi Özdamar's *Life is a Caravanserai*», 66.

[9] «Middle class» is meant in the U.S. context here.

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