The City as Stage of Transgression: Performance, Picaresque Reminiscences, and Linguistic Incongruity in Emine S. Özdamar’s *The Bridge of the Golden Horn*

This essay investigates humoresque aspects of performance, gender, the picaresque, and linguistic incongruity in the novel Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn by the German-Turkish writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar. The main triggers of laughter and pleasure are based on play and incongruity, translational transfers, a bodily concept of language, jokes and puns, theatrical enacting and impersonating, masquerade, and finally mimicry of female stock figures. Özdamar’s choice of a theatrical and performance-based approach to gender identities and perceptions of urban spaces follows the path of comic and picaresque traditions.

The following paper will deal with humoresque aspects of performance, gender, the picaresque, and linguistic incongruity in the novel Die Brücke vom Goldenen Horn (1998) by prominent German-Turkish writer Emine Sevgi Özdamar. Özdamar’s choice of a theatrical and performance-based approach to gender identity and perception of urban spaces makes it therefore an interesting object of investigation in the light of gender, humour, and media. Much of the novel’s humour can be traced back to the key stimuli of laughter play, incongruity, power struggle, and relief (cf. Smuts). In consideration of the wide range of comical aspects in Özdamar’s second novel, the following analysis focuses on three principal parts: The first aim is to examine the nature of the heroine’s juvenile discovery in the light of a picaresque literary tradition. The second part deals with different forms of verbal humour, wit, and laughter with a main focus on translational shifts that create new, unconventional meanings beyond Turkish and German language norms. The third part of this essay finally discusses aspects of masquerade, mimicry, and (theatrical) performance that the heroine applies in a tactical manner in order to subvert gender norms, female stock figures and gender coded urban spaces.

Özdamar’s prose trilogy includes also Das Leben ist eine Karawanserei (1992) (Life is a Caravansary) and Seltsame Sterne starren zur Erde (2003) (Strange Stars Turn to Earth). The plot of The Bridge of the Golden Horn spans a nine-year period portraying the political, social, and private life of the heroine between 1966 and 1975. The novel ties in with the prequel by further

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1 Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
2 Only the first part of the trilogy has been translated into English.
developing the character’s biography against the background of the 1968 move-
mant. A major part of chapter one is set in Berlin where the eighteen year-old
arrives in 1966 as a classic ‘Gastarbeiter’ (‘guest worker’) however pursuing
the long term aim of becoming an actress. West Berlin is experienced as a place
of encounter with different individuals and social groups who introduce her to
the ongoing student movement and draw her into the communist philosophy.
After her return to Turkey, the now politically educated heroine takes theatre
classes in Istanbul and becomes involved in the mounting violence between
ultranationalists and communists. She engages in numerous political and sex-
ual affairs and, after a brief imprisonment by Turkish military, she leaves
Istanbul for Berlin in order to pursue her acting career. The novel concludes
with her departure on 21 November 1975, the day of Franco’s death, which can
be read as a sign of renewal and hope.

In the few scholarly appraisals, The Bridge of the Golden Horn has been eval-
uated as a novel of a leftist socialisation and female adventure (Fessmann 4), as
a Berlin novel (Schütz and Döring 196), as a novel about Europe (McGowan),
and as a hybrid genre in the style of a postmodern Bildungsroman à la Günter
Grass’s Die Blechtrommel (The Tin Drum) (cf. Ghaussey; Oraliş). Moreover,
Özdamar’s unique interplay of diverse languages and the criticism of German
labour market policy resulted in a comparative study between Turkish-German
minority literature and postcolonial texts (cf. Milz). In contrast to the debut
novel, The Bridge of the Golden Horn seems to elude any simple classification
in terms of cultural or linguistic criteria and negates any stigmatization as
exotic, oriental, or fabulous (cf. Konuk). Instead, the few academic analyses
focus on the political backdrop of the plot as well as the experimental narrative
style which is characteristic of all of Özdamar’s texts. Due to the playful way
of story-telling, one is inclined to evaluate Özdamar’s sequel as picaresque (Shafi
207; McGowan 63) and the juvenile heroine, with characteristics of Günter
Grass’s child-narrator Oskar Matzerath (Oraliş 49), as a postmodern picara.

Picaresque Reminiscences

The Bridge of the Golden Horn can be read as a hybrid of fictional picaresque
with elements of an adventure novel, an historical novel, and urban fiction. The
comparison to the European tradition of picaresque fiction, marked by its
episodic plot, quasi-autobiographical perspective, and lowborn narrator,
requires some explanation and differentiation. Traditionally, the picaresque
genre relies on “satire” that is, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the
employment “of sarcasm, irony, ridicule, etc. in exposing, denouncing, derid-
ing, or ridiculing vice, folly, indecorum, abuses, or evils of any kind”. A
picaresque novel usually depicts the adventures of a roguish hero (picaro)
or heroine (picara) of low social class who lives by his or her wits in a corrupt