
On the Enduring Impact of Literature:

A Conversation with Azade Seyhan

Dr. Azade Seyhan is a Professor of German and Comparative Literature and Adjunct Professor of Philosophy at Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. In her most recent book, *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton UP, 2001), she explores the domain of transnational poetics, considering themes such as memory, language, and autobiography. Other recent publications include "Enduring Grief: Autobiography as the 'Poetry of Witness' in the work of Assia Djebar and Nazim Hikmet" (forthcoming in *Comparative Literature Studies*) and "Linguistic Difference and Cultural Translatability: a Primer" (ADFL Bulletin 33, 2002). She teaches courses on German literary and intellectual history, cultural diversity in German society, philosophical approaches to criticism, women's writing, migrancy, exile, and diasporas.

FOCUS: What sparked your interest in German and Comparative Literature?

Azade Seyhan: I think that my academic career has not had a very traditional trajectory. Just by the circumstances of my birth, I think I was destined to be a comparatist of some sort. My father was one of the few students who was sent by Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, to study modern science in Germany in order to come back and contribute to the establishment of the modern Turkish university system. My mother was a chemist. She is also a great storyteller, and I dedicate my second book to her as the alchemist of tales. I went to a German school in Istanbul, and that is where my interest in German literature blossomed. There was an emphasis on German literature of the classical period. Then I went to Robert College in Istanbul and studied Comparative Literature there, with an emphasis on German literature. Later I came to the United States

on a Fulbright grant to study linguistics, and got my first Master's degree in Near Eastern Languages. I came to the University of Washington in Seattle to study Comparative Literature, but I ended up getting a Ph.D. in German.

FOCUS: What sparked your interest in transnational literature?

Seyhan: My interest in the international dimensions of literature is what propelled me to study literatures in a more transnational context. Literature tends to be a very universal human interest, like art, and I have always felt that it was problematic to confine literatures to national paradigms. Certainly there are national, temporal, historical and geographical characteristics that define literature, but I think there is some universal appeal that is best teased out in this notion of transnational literature. Transnational is also a term that is, at least at this point in history, free of prejudice and boundaries. I do believe in the historical situatedness of literatures. At the same time, I believe that we need to move away from certain paradigms in order to understand them better, or at least engage in a critical dialog with these paradigms.

FOCUS: You have written quite a bit about the usefulness of transnational literature and literature in general in the college classroom. Could you comment on the relevance of your research both in the classroom and beyond the classroom?

Seyhan: I think literature is an indispensable part of any liberal arts education. It gives us vistas that more strictly defined disciplines don't always give us. It affords us very interesting glimpses into other cultures, which are not necessarily available through sheer analytic approaches. One example is that we can't come up with an analytical paradigm and hope that it applies to all cultures. I have always said that we need to understand the universal appeal of literature and its contribution to a better grasp of other cultures, but we also need to balance that with specific knowledge of specific cultures. We cannot throw cultural specificity out the window, and come up with some theoretical paradigm that is supposed to explain everything, every cultural nuance. There are nuances, but there are also certain notions

that cultures share. This is the negotiation we have to implement.

I believe in literature's usefulness, in and of itself, but I also believe in its supplementary power. We understand history better by studying the literature of certain historical periods. Narratives and stories remember what official histories forget; literature is an institution of cultural memory. When I teach literature in the classroom, I ask my students to articulate its relevance to everything else they are studying. I ask them to write papers about how these glimpses, these insights into other cultures through literature, help them to understand their courses in history, in anthropology. For that reason, my courses are always cross-listed with anthropology and philosophy.

I also have said on many occasions in my classroom that although we live in a very visual age, I still think that the impact of literature is much more enduring than the impact of images. Images are fleeting, and we are bombarded with them to the extent that we can't even make sense of them, or we become jaded by images. As is happening right now – we see these images of bombings as if they were a video game, and it leaves no impact on us after a while. The impact of the written word is more enduring. I also think literature is more accessible: we can always go to the library and find a book, but we may not have the up-to-date computer that will bring us all these images. Images are fleeting, but literature still tends to be an archive of cultural histories, as well as our own histories.

FOCUS: There has been much effort in recent years by authors, filmmakers, and scholars to rewrite and redefine the “bridge between cultures” metaphor. What is your take on this metaphor?

Seyhan: The bridge metaphor has been around for a long time, Turkish writers have been especially fascinated by this metaphor. Writers from Istanbul tend to be more interested in this image, because Istanbul is, of course, astride two continents and has always seen itself as a bridge, although the Strait of Bosphorus did not have any bridges until very recently. We actually had to ferry from one continent to the other. Perhaps at that time the ferry or “ferrying” metaphor – “übersetzen” – was a more appropriate metaphor.

I believe “the bridge” is a useful metaphor, but maybe we should cross the bridge and join forces or walk together across the bridge.

Ivo Andric, a writer from the former Yugoslavia, won the Nobel Prize with his novel *The Bridge on the Drina*. This novel had a very large impact on Turkish readers, writers and scholars. This book is still of great interest today, because, in spite of all the ink spilled about the bloodshed in Bosnia, we have really not gotten a historical view of the conflicts in that part of the world. The book recounts how diverse cultural memories accumulated on this bridge between the Serbians and the Bosnians in an outpost of the Ottoman Empire. Instead of bringing these people together, the bridge separated them. I think the bridge is a cultural metaphor that can connect but also disconnect, that can both unite and disunite. I think that we have to be together on the bridge and not build it from different shores. There needs to be cooperation in the building of this bridge. I would have hoped that these bridges would have been built a long time ago, and that we would be beyond the bridge metaphor, but I also like Ruth Beckermann’s idea of building a bridge underneath oneself, because perhaps existing bridges lack a kind of cultural infrastructure that we need. This is important, because the bridge shouldn’t just signify crossing the river, but also be cognizant of the roads that merge into the highway that goes over the bridge. I think the roads “feeding into the bridge” is a metaphor that emphasizes strengthening the cultural infrastructure and the roads that lead to that bridge.

The bridge is not a metaphor that I have worked with myself, probably because I wish we could go beyond it in a historical sense, and, instead, build the cultural support systems for the final production of the bridge. All the other work that goes into the bridge, the subtext, is important. I think it is important that we see bridges in their historical context rather than just their spatial context. The temporal and the spatial have to go hand in hand.

FOCUS: What do you think is problematic about the terms “Ausländerliteratur” and “Migrantenliteratur”?

Seyhan: Naming can be very important simply because language becomes a source of both misrepresentation and prejudice. Many years ago I was one of the co-editors of *The New German Critique’s* special issue on minority cultures in Germany. Several articles contested these terms, “Ausländerliteratur” and “Migrantenliteratur,” because “Ausländerliteratur,” of course, would mean that this literature is just the literature of the foreigners or outsiders and therefore is never going to be “our” literature. It sets up a dichotomy of “us against them,” which is in a sense unbridgeable. It becomes ghettoized and kept somewhat separately from the intellectual, literary and cultural debate and participation in a larger cultural and literary network. That was always problematic, not only for myself but also for others who were working on literatures of other national and ethnic groups in Germany. I think “Migrantenliteratur” came a bit later, and that term is problematic because migrancy has the connotation of being something temporary, fleeting, and therefore could raise the question in the minds of readers, “why even bother with reading this? It may just be fad or only of very limited academic interest.”

I have written about how language tends to house or create misrepresentations. How we define words and how we name things has a major impact on how we perceive reality. I think representations are very complicit in the propagation of ideologies, especially very problematic ideologies and false notions about “us” and “others.” For that reason, I have tried to find terms that would not accrue negative connotations in the course of time, terms that are somewhat neutral. At the time of writing *Writing Outside the Nation*, I thought that I would privilege the term “transnational” which didn’t have a negative connotation. Like “transatlantic,” a term which simply meant we would be traveling but traveling with, I hoped, an open mind. Transnational for me also has connotations of translating, or translating cultures, to the extent which that is possible. Obviously, there are things lost in translation, and there may be many things lost in transnational ventures. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t try. Owning up to the loss in translation should not hold us back from translation or from transnational encounters

of the literary kind.

FOCUS: Where do you see the role of writers such as Feridun Zaimoğlu?

Seyhan: Feridun Zaimoğlu creates a kind of culture that is so radically cut off from the home culture, but at the same time defines what otherness really means, not for the intellectual elite but for a large segment of the Turkish German population that is marginalized. And I think he has become a voice for those who were not able to be educated properly in Germany, for those who are among the “lost generation” in Germany. The first generation of writers has come with a lot of baggage, which I think they have used to good effect, with good results. Zaimoğlu represents this culture that is really trying to find its voice. Its memories have become unhinged. I think he is doing something very important there. But it remains to be seen where that is going to go, whether they are really going to come up with a new cultural voice.

FOCUS: What projects are you working on currently? What new fields of research do you see emerging?

Seyhan: I think – and I have practiced what I preached - that German literature and culture speak more effectively in international and transcultural contexts. I am working on a project currently which is about how German culture has had an impact, not only in the West but at other sites. I am going back in history from the current Turkish-German culture in Germany to another Turkish-German culture that took root during the Nazi period, in Istanbul, when Ataturk invited scores of expelled German-Jewish and German professors to come and rebuild the university system in Istanbul. I am interested in the books that were written at that time, because many of these books are critiques of the Enlightenment legacy. We know a lot about the critique of the Enlightenment that was produced in the United States by members of the Frankfurt School, but there were also very excellent books that were produced at a different geographical site. The silence of cultural history in reference to these more marginal geographic sites concerns me. So

I am now working on these books, comparing them with canonical works like *Dialektik der Aufklärung*. I think we need to look at different sites where both a critique of German modernity has been generated and also where other great contributions to German culture within an international context have been generated.

FOCUS: Thank you very much.

Seyhan: You are very welcome.

*Silke Schade, Laura Vas and Aine Zimmerman contributed to this interview.
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